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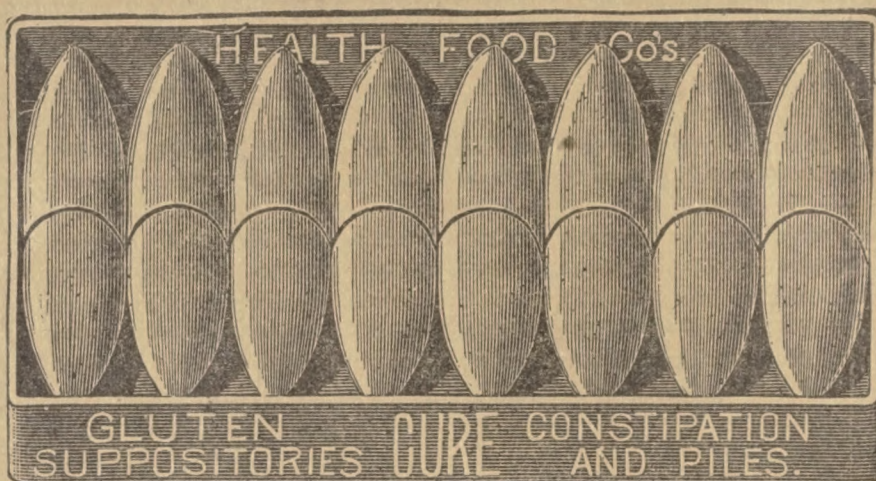
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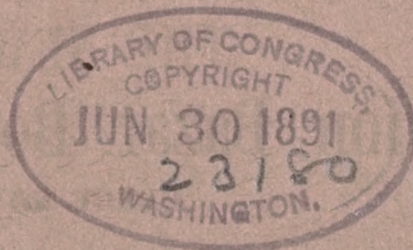
LOVE AT SARATOGA;

OR,

MARRIED IN HASTE.

BY

LUCY RANDALL COMFORT.



NEW YORK:

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17 TO 27 VANDEWATER STREET.

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Love at Saratoga.

LOVE AT SARATOGA.

CHAPTER I.

PRETTY DORA.

ROSES in a cracked pitcher on the stained pine bureau; roses in a pink drift on the dilapidated chair beside it; half-open buds on the floor, and sprays of leaves lying around everywhere—and Dora Beck, standing before the little six-inch square of looking-glass with the royal blossoms twisted in her golden tresses, and a dress of pale-pink organdy, all puffs and flutings and edges of Valenciennes lace, trailing in clear folds over the floor, was the fairest rose of them all.

Fair with a beauty which would have inspired an artist with dreams of Cleopatra, or Venus, or Helen of Troy; a beauty far out of, and beyond the ordinary type. For Theodora Beck was small and slight, with pale-yellow hair full of golden gleams, and a complexion as delicate as the inside of an apple blossom, a full, scarlet mouth, and roguish dimples in either cheek, while her eyes, large and dark, of the deepest and most liquid shade of hazel brown, gave a most winning expression to the fair, childish face. And the rosy crimson of excitement had risen into her face, as she stood there, pulling out a rose-bud here, fastening in a full-blown flower there, and turning this way and that, to get a glimpse, in the wretched little mirror, of her pretty figure.

“How do I look?” said Dora, half aloud. “Would any one mistake me for a lady? Oh, if I could only promenade up and down those long piazzas, to the music of the band, and drink the spring water, with a lace parasol and a lovely French hat, like Miss Ravenel! If I could only—”

But in the midst of Dora's soliloquy, the bedroom door burst open, and a tall, raw-boned woman of some two- or three-and-thirty bounced into the room like a human tornado; a woman dressed in faded calico, with a knot of tow-colored hair, fastened by a most uncompromising horn comb, on the very top of her head; pale-blue eyes, and a Roman nose. And

Dora Beck turned scarlet, and shrunk away out of the very glow of the sunset, as if she would have liked to vanish through the crack of the floor!

"Why, Theodora Beck!" screamed Miss Joanna, her elder sister—elder by sixteen years, and sourer by many degrees of acidity—"what are you doing? All stuck up with flowers like a crazy creature, and, as I live and breathe, with Mrs. Stacy's pink organdy dress on, as I spent two hours in ironing this very morning?"

"I'm not hurting it, Joanna," faltered Dora, ready to cry with mortification and annoyance. "I haven't crumpled it the least bit in the world. I only wanted to see how I should look in it!"

"And a pretty figure you make," said Joanna, irately. "It ain't for the likes of you to go gallivantin' around in other folks' finery. Take it off this minute, and never let me see you cut up such a caper again! Do you hear? Take it off!"

Coloring deeply, and with a confused sense of angry shame, Theodora obeyed, under the falcon eye of her elder sister, and appeared once more in the sprigged calico dress of antique pattern and scanty cut which formed her ordinary costume.

"And now then, come down-stairs," said Joanna, authoritatively, "and help with Miss Marcel's laces, or I sha'n't get 'em done to-night!"

"I'm tired of ironing," said Dora, with an impatient shrug of the shoulders. "I've been ironing all the afternoon, and my arms ache."

"I can't help that," retorted Joanna. "I'm tired too—but them laces have got to be done up to-night. And you may as well be working to earn your bread as bedizening yourself like a play actress."

And so, unwillingly enough, pretty Dora followed her sister down the narrow, wooden staircase into a low-ceiled room, all irradiated by the western glory of the setting sun, where there was an ironing-table, two or three clothes-horses well laden with newly laundried dresses, ruffled skirts and laces, and a cooking-stove, over which crouched a very old man in a black cloth skull-cap and a faded dressing-gown, cowering over the red coals as if he was half frozen, although any thermometer would have marked the atmosphere of the room at ninety.

"My pipe, Joanna!" croaked he, looking vaguely around him; "my pipe! I've mislaid it somewhere—and nobody will look for it. Nobody ever *does* look for my things."

"It's right there in the ashes, grandfather, where you

dropped it yourself," said Joanna, stooping to recover the article in question, and throwing it carelessly into his lap.

"Here's your pink cambric polonaise, Dora—what have you been doing it up for? It wasn't half soiled enough for the wash."

"It was all crumpled," retorted Dora, who was trying an iron by holding it at an alarmingly close proximity to her dimpled cheek. "And I want to wear it to-morrow."

Joanna looked quickly up from the white *peignoir* she was pulling into shape.

"To wear where?" demanded she, tartly.

"To the races, of course," said Dora, ironing desperately away, and never venturing to look up, although she *felt* the stern scrutiny with which her elder sister was regarding her.

"Then you may as well put it away at once," said Joanna, "for you ain't a-going!"

"I am, too!" retorted Dora, with a toss of the yellow braids, all threaded with gold, and an ominous sparkling of the deep-brown eyes.

Joanna looked sharply at her. "Has Reuben Hallowell asked you to go?" said she, somewhat more gently.

"No, he hasn't!" responded Dora. "And if he had, I wouldn't go with him—a great lumbering fellow, with cow-hide boots, and a hat that looks as if it had come out of the Ark!"

"A deal too good for you," asserted Joanna. "And I only wonder what he can find to fancy in *you*. But I see how it is—you're all took up with that showy young Gates, down at the tannery."

Dora laughed. "It's the other way, Joanna," smiled she. "He's all taken up with *me*!"

"I dare say," said the elder sister, incredulously. "But I guess me and grandfather will have something to say to that."

"I'm sixteen," said Dora, flushing with quick anger; "and I won't be dictated to who I shall go with and who I sha'n't."

"You're only a child," retorted Joanna, "and you haven't neither sense nor judgment—no, nor you never will have. If it was Reuben Hallowell that was going to take you, now—"

"But it ain't!" flashed out Dora; "and it won't be!"

"Very well," said Joanna, with a grim screwing up of her thin lips. "Then you may make up your mind to stay at home."

"I won't be ordered by you," cried Dora, with quivering

lips and eyes luminous with unshed tears; "I'll do as I please."

Joanna Beck turned sharply around.

"Grandfather," said she, "I wish you'd interfere. I can do nothing at all with this headstrong child. Grandfather, I say!"

The old man, who had been sitting immovable before the fire, like a statue of discolored wax, suddenly roused himself from his lethargy at the call, and looked around with dim blue eyes.

"Eh?" said he. "Dolly? is it Dolly again?"

"Yes, it's Dolly," said Joanna, sharply; "and she's set on going to the Saratoga races with that good-for-nothing, gambling fellow, George Gates—and I tell her she sha'n't."

"Of course she sha'n't," piped out the old man. "Do you hear, Dolly? It ain't no place for you."

"*Why* isn't it a place for me?" demanded Dora, trembling all over with excitement and agitation. "The fine ladies from the Clarendon and Congress Hall are all going in their barouches and landaus; Miss Ravenel has ordered a dress from New York on purpose for the races."

"You ain't Miss Ravenel," satirically responded her sister, "and you haven't any landaus and open barouches to go in."

"Is that a reason I should be shut out, for ever and ever, from any sort of enjoyment?" cried Dora, passionately.

"Folly and nonsense," said Joanna; "you're not going one step. Grandfather says so—and *I* say so, and there is an end of the matter. My goodness me!" with a sudden start and a rising inflection of the voice, "what *are* you about? You're scorching Miss Lacey's Swiss muslin to a cinder."

But Dora Beck was in no humor to listen to any more lecturing. Her cheeks were burning, her lips aquiver; the large, diamond-bright tears hung on her long, dark lashes, while her cherry lips were pressed close together. She flung the iron one way, the scorched muslin skirt another, and darted out of the room like a hunted wild creature.

"Eh?" said the old man, again staring vacantly around the room. "Is it Dolly again? Seems to me that girl is always tormenting us. You'd better have taken my advice, Joanna, and put her out to service."

"Who'd have her? a chit of a thing like that!" retorted the elder sister, who was surveying the scorched muslin with a lugubrious countenance. "Oh, dear, dear, I don't know what'll ever take this spot out—and Miss Lacey is so particular, too! But one thing I'll put down my foot to—I *won't*

have her tearing around the country with the like of George Gates."

"No, no, no!" uttered the old man, feebly rubbing his hands as he bent closer over the fire. "She must go out to service, Joanna—to service!"

Meanwhile pretty Dora herself had rushed out of the back door, and down a wide path, embowered with grape-vines, to a sheltered nook at the back of the garden, where a gnarled old pear-tree hung its golden drops of summer's fruitage over a mass of perpendicular rocks, and the grass grew tall and rank in the waving shadows, while, at the left, a cold stream trickled down, drop by drop, into a shallow stone basin, hollowed out by the perpetual action of the water into a natural cup.

The "Great Rock," as it was called, had been Dora Beck's haven of refuge from the time she could remember. She had cried over "Alonzo and Melissa" there—she had perused "Charlotte Temple" with rapt interest under the shadow of the blossoming pear boughs—she had crept away thither to be out of the reach of her grandfather's exactions and Joanna's shrill tongue, and there, with her forehead pressed against the cool mossy rock, and the deep shade folding her around like a mantle, she had dreamed her first vague impossible dreams of the Future, out of which a Prince Charming should some time ride, with diamond-pointed spear and glittering crown upon his head.

Theodora Beck had never known either father or mother. Her earliest remembrance had been of her stern old grandfather, who seemed to regard little girls as a nuisance, and dolls as an outrageous piece of folly, even when constructed of the cheap material, yept corncobs, and dressed in the refuse of the rag bag—and the tyrannical elder sister, whose whole object in life seemed to be to grind a certain amount of work out of all who came within her relentless orbit. Naturally enough, she had grown up defiant and rebellious, impatient of the curb, and anxious to escape from the uncongenial atmosphere. She had seen her golden hair and deep wine-brown eyes in the distorted looking-glass, and awakened, all of a sudden, to the consciousness that she was beautiful. And in that potent spell of beauty she believed that she held the magic key which was to unlock to her the gates of a newer and brighter life.

She had had her dreams, this pretty sixteen-year-old Dora, even while Joanna fancied her absorbed in the labors of the fluting-iron or the interminable lengths of machine stitching;

she had asked herself in secret what Dora was like, and wondered with shy, secret blushes on her cheek, if ever a true lover would bow at her feet!

"Not a rough, hard-handed farmer like Reuben Hollowell," she had said to herself, with a grimace, "but a gentleman. I will marry no one but a gentleman, who can give me a set of diamonds, and a basket phaeton, with cream-colored ponies."

In one of her battered school histories there was a picture of Mary Queen of Scots, with the tri-cornered coif over her pure pale face, and strings of pearls around her neck—and many a night after she had gone up to her room, Dora would sit studying the features of the world's enchantress, and comparing them with her own, in a sort of innocent, unconscious egotism.

"I am as pretty as she was," she would whisper, smilingly to herself. "And I won't marry Reuben Hollowell, and bury myself alive in a wretched country hole like this."

And now she felt, poor, pretty little dreamer, as if Miss Joanna's rude iconoclastic hand were pulling her down from the first round of the ladder of success—as if the dim gray curtain of her every-day life were momentarily lifted, only to torture her vision with a momentary glimpse of a possible future, and then to fall again in cruel eclipse.

For the Saratoga races were all the fashion this summer. The belles of the great hotels were devising costumes for the day; the grand stand was to be wreathed in flowers and hung with silken bunting, a fit frame for fair faces and Parisian toilets; the programmes were to be printed on white satin in letters of gold, and all the gay world of Saratoga was to be on the *qui vive*. And little Dora Beck was determined that she, too, would drink her cup of happiness from the general fountain of excitement and delight.

"I *will* go!" she cried aloud to the drooping pear boughs and trickling thread-like stream, as if they were human and could sympathize in her tribulations. "And I will go with George Gates, because he has a new phaeton with silver-plated harness. They may say what they like, but they shall not keep me at home. I'll wear my pink polonaise and the string of jet beads and go like a lady. And grandfather and Joanna may say what they please!"

And so, creeping along behind clustering currant bushes, all hung with crimson fringes of glittering fruit, and thickets of gorgeous pink and white hollyhocks down to the garden wall, Dora made her way back to her own room, where the roses still lay in withering heaps, and took out the pasteboard

box, which was her nearest approach to a desk, to write a summons to the valiant and chivalric Mr. George Gates.

"How shall I write it?" said Dora to herself, sitting tailor fashion in front of the low window-seat on which she had spread out her paper to catch the last fading rays of sunset, with a new steel pen and a bottle of violet ink which she had bought of an itinerant peddler. "And what shall I say? For I don't want it to be one bit like a love letter. And George Gates is one of the sort that if you give him an inch he'll take an ell."

And so Dora contracted her pretty brows and twisted up her red rosebud of a mouth, and frowned at the sunset, and nibbled the end of her pen in vain, longing for something like an inspiration.

Half an hour later Miss Joanna Beck, on her way to the well for a pail of water, met little Moses Griffin, a neighbor's child, running around the corner of the house, with something white in his hand.

"Eh!" said Joanna, who was suspicious by nature, and would have made an excellent New York detective. "Where are you running to, Moses? And what have you got there?"

Little Moses looked this way and that in a sort of breathless panic, but there was no escape. The stone wall was too high to be climbed, and Miss Joanna's Amazonian form filled up the garden gate beyond all hopes of running the blockade in that direction. So he only screwed the knuckles of his left hand into his eyes and burst into a howl.

"It's—it's a letter," said he.

"Where did you get it?" sternly demanded Joanna.

"Miss Dora give it to me."

"Who's it for?"

"Young Mr. Gates, down at the tannery," unwillingly confessed little Moses.

"Just give it to *me*!" said Miss Joanna. "I'll make it all right."

And before little Moses could decide whether or not it was expedient for him to obey this order, she had twitched it out of his hand.

The boy disappeared in the twilight like a gnome of evil, whimpering as he went, and Miss Joanna, with a grim smile upon her face, tore the letter into small bits and flung them behind an ancient barberry bush which flourished close to the gate.

"I'll have no underhand correspondence *here*!" said she.

And unconscious little Dora, sitting in the window-seat with

her chin in her hands and her wonderful deep-brown eyes fixed dreamily on the silver star of the evening, which was just beginning to glimmer through the opal dark, was saying to herself, with a half smile:

“Who knows? Perhaps to-morrow will be a turning point in my life.”

There are seasons when the mantle of prophecy seems to fall upon us like an unseen veil. There are times in which our mental vision grows clearer, and the film between us and the future is temporarily lifted. But our blunt perceptions are all unconscious of the mystic mood, and alas! the clouds settle down once more, deeper and darker than ever.

So it was with poor Theodora Beck, the solitary human flower who had grown up and blossomed in the shadow of the dreary old farm-house on the Saratoga Road, where the stiff Lombardy poplars rustled in the night wind, and the pine woods beyond answered with low Æolian whispers. And as the moments crept on, each one brought nearer the morrow that was freighted with the destiny of her own young life.

The night air had grown strangely damp; the silver shining of the stars seemed to strike a deadly chill to her heart; she rose up with a little shiver.

“Surely I am not doing anything wrong?” she questioned herself. “What nonsense! As if it could be wrong to slip away from grandfather and Joanna for one day—just one day of merrymaking and happiness. I am only sixteen, and I have never been anywhere. No,” very decidedly, as she took out the confining hair-pin and let the cascade of golden hair float freely down her back, “it *can't* be wrong!”

CHAPTER II.

THE BIRD IS FLOWN.

THE robins were whistling the first melodious notes that seem to pierce the rose and gold of a summer dawn like undulating threads of silver; the stars had hardly yet faded out of the pearly gray horizon, when Dora Beck rose noiselessly, and dressed herself in the pink cambric dress and polonaise, with the string of jet beads around her neck and a cluster of sweet white roses in her hair—the golden hair that crowned her fair girlish head like a glory. And when she had tied on a simple split-straw hat of her own trimming, she crept up into the old garret above, and, opening a huge and ancient chest of painted wood, took out a red camlet cloak with a quaint folding

hood which had belonged to her dead grandmother, and wrapped it over her like a domino, so that only her bright eyes were fairly visible—eyes that danced and sparkled like liquid diamonds.

“Joanna herself would scarcely recognize me in such a disguise as *this*,” said she to herself, mischievously smiling, as she glided softly down the stairs, holding her very breath as she crept past Joanna’s threshold, and stole out of the back door where the tall tiger lilies were nodding their turbaned heads in the crimson flood of sunrise, and the dew sparkled on leaf and twig, in the mysterious spell that broods over the birth of every new day. Springing as lightly over the old stone wall at the back of the garden as if she were a squirrel, she hurried along over green pasture-fields where the peaceful ruminants lifted their heads to gaze at her as she passed by, and through green patches of pine woods where the fragrant needles rustled under her feet and crows called hoarsely to one another from the dizzy crests of the trees overhead—hurried with a strange sense of exultant delight, as if she had left the fetters of her old life behind and begun a new and rapturous existence, half gypsy, half enchanted princess. And through it all there ran the disturbed and guilty sense of having violated some implied law of the Medes and Persians in the old farm-house—the sense that she had become a rebel, and must, sooner or later, be dragged back to the judgment-seat, there to receive sentence.

“What will Joanna say,” she kept on asking herself, “when she finds out that I am gone?”

At a rustic stile just at the entrance to some woods, about three miles away from the Beck farm-house, she paused, rosy and breathless, to await the appearance of the knight of the tan-pits with his new pheaton and silver-decked harness.

“It must be seven o’clock,” she thought, looking up at the sun, which was her only chronometer. “Seven o’clock and more. And I told him to be here at half past six.”

But the maple leaves rustled overhead, and the birds sung in the tangled boughs, and the shadows crept further and further along the mossy turf, and still, like Mariana’s hero in the moated grange, “he came not.”

Pretty Dora was not accustomed to this sort of treatment from her rustic cavaliers. The indignant crimson rose to her cheek as she looked vainly up and down the curves of the dusty road beyond; the wine-brown eyes blazed bodingly.

“I won’t be played with!” said she to herself. “I’ll stay

here no longer. I'll walk on, and when he overtakes me, I'll take no notice of him."

And so, with impetuous footstep and heart beating with suppressed resentment, Theodora Beck hurried out of the sheltering woods, and began her weary walk over the dusty high-road which was now beginning to be dotted with equipages of various styles, traveling shows destined to be set up just outside the boundaries of the race grounds, and groups of pedestrians. But Dora cared little for this; she had been brought up with none of the shrinking diffidence which characterizes the dainty beauties of the aristocratic drawing-room, and moreover, the red camlet mantle which covered her dress and figure, concealed her girlish grace and beauty, and gave her an aspect quite foreign to her real personality, while it effectually shielded her from any impertinent notice. And as she walked along, she glanced backward ever and anon, to see if there were any trace of the recreant cavalier who was so unaccountably behind time.

In the meantime, however, a very spirited little drama was being enacted at the dismal old farm-house with the row of Lombardy poplars in front, and the grove of whispering pine-trees in the rear.

Miss Joanna Beck had come down-stairs as usual, after assisting to dress the old grandfather, who grew less and less capable every day of helping himself, and had prepared the breakfast of salt mackerel, three boiled eggs, and heavy home-made bread, before it occurred to her that her young sister was more than ordinarily late. But at length, glancing up at the clock, whose face was half veiled in a mist of green asparagus boughs, placed there to attract the flies away from the rest of the room, she uttered, sharply:

"A quarter to seven—and Dora not down yet! What *does* ail that child? I think she grows lazier every day."

The old man, who had been intent on toasting a slice of bread for his own especial consumption, looked feebly around at the shrill tones of his elder granddaughter's voice.

"Dolly?" said he. "Is it Dolly again? Dolly always *was* idle. Call her, Joanna; call her. I can't be kept waiting all day for my breakfast, and the toast browned just the right color."

Joanna stepped briskly to the foot of the stairs, and called once, twice, three times, without receiving an answer. Then she hurried up the stairs, her stiffly starched calico dress rustling ominously as she went, and burst the door open with small ceremony, crying out as she did so:

“Theodora Beck, what *are* you about? Don’t you know it is ’most seven o’clock, and—” But she stopped short on perceiving that Dora was not there. “My—goodness—me!” said she, with wide-open mouth and eyes, “where is the child?” And then, as a sudden flood of comprehension seemed to sweep across her brain, she added, in a sort of shrill shriek: “Gone to Saratoga races, I’ll be bound, the good-for-nothing, self-willed, disobedient little hussy! Gone to Saratoga races—and in the very face and eyes of all I said to her!”

But as she stood there, rooted to the floor in surprise and dismay, the feeble voice of the old grandfather called up to her from below:

“Joanna, Joanna! tell Dolly to put on her best frock and make haste down. Here’s Reuben Hollowell come with a one-horse buggy to take her to the races.”

Miss Joanna glanced distractedly out of the window, and sure enough, under the scant shadow of the Lombardy poplars stood the old white horse of the Hollowell establishment, with a red hollyhock in his head-stall, harness neatly blacked, and the old-fashioned buggy fitted up with new cloth cushions and a fresh piece of carpet on the floor.

“Well, I never!” said Joanna, and she hurried down in sore perplexity.

Reuben Hollowell, a sturdy young farmer, stood by the door, looking exceedingly ill at ease in his Sunday clothes, with a hat too large for him, gloves correspondingly small, and a gigantic cabbage rose in his button-hole. He was tall and stalwart, with honest light-blue eyes, hair of the very lightest tint of flax, and a broad, sunburnt face, beaming with good humor.

“Good-morning, Miss Joanna,” said he, rather awkwardly, as he shook hands with the eldest Miss Beck. “I’m sorry I can’t take you too, but the buggy won’t hold but two—so if Dora will get her things on—”

“Her things, indeed,” said Joanna, forgetting all etiquette in the excitement of the minute. “She’s gone!”

“Gone!” echoed Reuben Hollowell, staring with all his eyes.

“Gone!” shrieked the old man, dropping his slice of brown toast into the fire.

“Yes, gone!” said Joanna, emphatically. “And one thing’s certain—she sha’n’t come back to *this* house.”

“Don’t say that, Miss Joanna, don’t say that,” cried good-natured Reuben. “Remember, she’s only a young thing and

likes her own way, as who don't? But sure, she's never gone alone?"

"I don't know whether she has or not," said Joanna, half choked with vexation. "And I don't care; the willful, feather-headed little chit! She may go to destruction her own way for all of me."

"Where do you suppose she's gone?" demanded Reuben, chewing blankly at a straw.

"To the races, of course," snapped Joanna. "Where else should she go? And with that good-for-nothing Gates fellow."

Reuben's countenance fell.

"Oh, Miss Joanna!" said he, piteously, "you don't really think *that*!"

"Yes, I do," said Joanna, inexorably.

"Miss Joanna, look here," said the honest swain, after cracking all his ten thumbs nervously in succession and staring hard at a print of "The Battle of Bunker Hill" on the opposite wall, "it ain't fit that a pretty young creeter like her should be at them gay races, either with George Gates or without, is it, now?"

"Of course it ain't," said Joanna, angrily.

"Certainly not," chimed in the old grandfather, who was trying to scrape off the charred crust of his beloved piece of toast, which he had rescued from the fiery coals with the kitchen tongs.

"Then," said Reuben Hollowell, "let's go and find her, you and me."

"Me!" said Joanna, in surprise.

"Yes, you," nodded the farmer. "If I should go after her ten to one she wouldn't come with me. *You've* got some authority over her."

"Not much," retorted Joanna Beck, biting her lip. "If I *had*—but then there ain't no use talking about it. May be you're right, Reuben Hollowell. I'll just stop to give gran'ther his breakfast, and take a bite and a sup myself, and then I'll get my things on. You'll take a cup of coffee, Reuben, won't you?"

The young man made a disclaiming gesture. "I couldn't eat a morsel," said he. "Nor yet drink a drop—it would choke me, I'm that fretted and worried about Dora."

"She ain't worth fretting for," said Joanna, grimly.

"I think she is," said Reuben, cheerfully. "So I'll go out and keep the flies off old Bonny; they're dreadful troublesome this time of year. And you won't keep me waiting longer than you can help, will you, Miss Joanna?" he added,

wistfully. "For little Dora, one oughtn't to be hard on her; she is so young, and so pretty, you know, and she understands so little about the ways of the world."

"Humph!" snorted Joanna, as she poured out her grandfather's first cup of weak coffee. "She knows more than you've any idea of, I guess. But you needn't fret yourself, Reuben Hallowell, I'll not keep you long."

CHAPTER III.

THE SARATOGA RACES.

THE Saratoga Race Ground was like the glitter of a magnified kaleidoscope on that golden summer day, as the sun climbed slowly to the zenith. The grand stand was full of ladies, an aristocratic, perfumed crowd, whose plumes and scarfs, and rainbow dresses fluttered in the soft wind, while their diamonds flashed back the rays of the intense sunshine. Below, on the level slopes of wide green turf, there was a confused crowd of tossing horses' heads, shining wheels, and decorated hammer-cloths, while the swaying mass of human faces gathered around the white ropes that separated the race-course from the other portion of the grounds would have furnished an excellent study for the physiognomist. While, further away, the swarm of parasites who fasten upon any such occasion for their own profits and speculation, were plying a brisk and busy trade—Punch and Judy shows, learned dogs, dancing bears, three card monte players, venders of stale cakes, bruised oranges, and dusty peanuts, and leaning against the poles which supported a mildewed canvas tent, within which a "fat lady" received admiring visitors at ten cents a head, stood our poor little Dora, flushed and wearied, and gazing listlessly at the throng as they ebbed and flowed with almost endless motion, now rushing by in a frantic mass, as the ringing of the bell announced the start of some popular equine favorite, now sauntering slowly back when the breathless excitement of the race was over, and a brief interval of quiet ensued. Close behind her a set of Scotch bag-pipes kept up an endless drone—at the left, a party of performing monkeys were gathering a harvest of pennies from the eager spectators—and, weary as she was, Dora laughed aloud in child-like glee at the pranks of these odd little parodies on humanity, with their gray withered faces and curly tails protruding from beneath gaudy scarlet jackets. And then she remembered how tired she was, and how hungry, and the tears followed close on the sparkle of laughter in her eyes—a very April shower.

“Are these the races?” said Dora to herself. “Nothing but dust and noise, and burning sunshine, and the people crowding one another so dreadfully. Oh, I am sorry I came. And I wish I was at home once more ironing dresses with Joanna, and—I’ll never speak to George Gates again as long as I live.”

For Dora was tired, and footsore, and hungry, and a little disposed to be frightened in the rush and confusion of the crowd, no one of whom seemed to notice the pretty pink polonaise, nor the straw hat trimmed with loops of white ribbon and a real crushed French rose. Except one or two whose stare had been so insolent that Dora had retreated behind the hood of the red camlet cloak in a sort of trembling panic, and was glad to lose herself in the stream of people rushing toward the grand stand. She could not get near enough to catch a glimpse of the lovely satin-coated horses with their rosetted heads and gayly dressed riders—she could not even distinctly discern the glories of the ladies seated in glittering tiers, like a terraced rose-garden, in the grand stand itself—and altogether, as she stood there, worn and weary, and ready to cry, she could not but confess to herself that her day of happiness had been a stupendous failure.

And here she was, with blistered feet and aching head, seven good miles away from home, and without a penny in her pocket.

“If I could only ride part of the way in Bill Fenwood’s omnibus, that is running every hour between the village and the race grounds,” thought Dora. “It would take me as far as the old sign-post, and I could easily walk the rest of the distance. But he charges twenty-five cents, and I have no money.”

As she stood there trying to summon up sufficient resolution to start off on the sultry homeward walk, a tall, handsome gentleman, in a light dove-colored suit, with diamonds sparkling in his linen, and a broad-brimmed Panama hat shading his straight, clearly outlined features, paused close to her, with a shorter, slighter man, in white linen, at his side.

“You’ll go back for the last heat, Branchley?” said the latter, eagerly consulting his watch. “It will come off in ten minutes now.”

“Not I!” carelessly retorted the tall stranger. “If this is a specimen of your American race-courses, I’ve seen enough of the article. You can’t expect a man who has been at Goodwood and Epsom to go into ecstasies over a little third-rate affair like this.”

The slighter of the two looked rather annoyed. "Of course," said he, "you can't suppose that this is equal to Jerome Park, or—"

"Don't let me detain you," said the hero of the gracefully drooping Panama hat. "I'll wait here for your return, and console myself with a cigar in the meanwhile. Or stay," with a smile, as his eye fell on the slight form and exquisitely lovely face that were only partially hidden behind the red camlet cloak, "I'll have my future unrolled by the mystic hand of the Saratoga sibyl. '*Il faut s'amuser*'—and what can be a more appropriate way of passing the time in such a place as this?"

"Nonsense!" cried out the other.

"You see our ideas differ on this, as on other subjects," said the man who had been addressed as "Branchley." "Go to your betting-book; I'll stay here and study my destiny. Pretty one," turning with a sort of chivalrous courtesy to the half-frightened girl, "will you tell my fortune?"

The color rose in a soft carmine tide to Theodora's cheek. Her first idea had been to vanish out of sight in the mazes of the crowd; but in a second her spirit of mischief and instinct of masquerade came to her rescue. And besides, it occurred to her mind that this was not a bad way of earning a little money to enable her to ride home in the coveted omnibus.

"Yes," said she, "I will tell your fortune. Give me your hand."

He held it out with an amused smile, which altered into an expression of positive surprise, as she flung back the red cloak, whose folds fettered her motion.

"By Jove!" he muttered to himself, "what a beauty she is!"

Nor was the exclamation uncalled for; for, truly, as Dora Beck stood there, with golden hair, dark glittering eyes, and complexion heightened into absolute brilliance, she was as beautiful as one of Salvator Rosa's ideal dreams.

For a moment or two she scrutinized the lines on the large white hand with apparent attention; then she lifted the long-lashed eyes shyly to his face.

"It will be a good fortune," said she. "Happy love—a bonny sweetheart—and a wedding-ring."

He drew a gold piece from his pocket, with a smile; she recoiled a step or two.

"I don't take gold," said he. "Only silver."

"You are the strangest fortune-teller I ever saw in my life," said he. "A future like that deserves the gleam of red gold."

"Only silver," she repeated, resolutely.

"Here it is, then;" and he exchanged the gold piece for one of silver, which Dora gravely dropped into a little chate-lain bag of black silk, embroidered with black bugles, which hung at her side. "But you mustn't run away from me before you have told me more about this bonny sweetheart of mine. Is she anything like *you*?"

Dora laughed with the innocent confidence of a child.

"I shall not tell you," said she. "Your fortune will come to you fast enough. And—"

"Why, The-o-do-ra! I am *surprised* at you!"

And glancing up with a start, pretty Dora found herself looking direct into the catty-green eyes of Miss Joanna herself, glaring like any basilisk, as she sat erect in Reuben Hallowell's one-horse chaise, with bonnet all bent and crumpled on one side, countenance streaked and powdered with dust, and an old-fashioned black silk *visite* drawn around her shoulders as if she had been a mummy, bent on rolling herself as tight as possible. While close beside her sat Hallowell himself, with the faded cabbage rose still drooping from his button-hole, the big hat wedged on the back of his head, and his honest countenance expressive of discomposure in the highest degree.

The handsome stranger glanced from one to the other of this strange party, and evidently comprehending that his presence was *de trop*, under all the circumstances, lifted his hat courteously as to a duchess, and passed on, to poor Dora's mingled regret and relief, leaving her coloring and confused, as she started back against the flapping canvas of the "fat lady's" tent.

"Upon—my—word!" slowly ejaculated Joanna, severely surveying her sister from the vantage ground of the high chaise. "I should like to know what all this means!"

A word of sympathy or kindness would have melted poor little Dora, in her present mood, into tears and submission; but her elder sister's contemptuous anger hardened her into stone.

"What *should* it mean?" retorted she, with well-assumed indifference. "Only that I'm not going to be cooped up forever like a bird in a cage."

"You are a bold, brazen-faced thing!" cried Joanna, half choked with rage. "How dare you stand here, bandying words with strangers, in a crowd like this?"

"Joanna, Joanna, don't!" whispered honest Reuben, pulling at Joanna Beck's sleeve.

"I'm saying no harm," said Dora, defiantly.

"A child like you," went on Joanna, "that knows nothing of the world. You deserve to be shut up in a garret, on bread and water, and you *shall* be, or I'll know the reason why."

"I am *not* a child," flashed out Dora, with burning cheeks and eyes that began to lighten liquid defiance. "And I'm as able to take care of myself as you are to take care of me."

"Hold your tongue!" vociferated Joanna.

"Don't, Joanna, *don't!*" pleaded Reuben, almost ready to cry. "Speak to her fair, poor little thing! Don't be harsh with her."

But the elder Miss Beck was in no mood to listen to advice of this temporizing nature.

"Theodora," said she, enunciating the syllables in the manner which had so often made Dora think her name the ugliest in all the world, "I ain't going to sit here arguing with you. Get into this carriage and come home with me and Mr. Hallowell—and then, if you'll ask his pardon and mine—"

"I won't!" cried out Dora, the burning roses on her cheek fading into a dead white at the indignity of the idea, "I'll never do it!"

"And it ain't me as wants you to do such a thing," burst out Reuben, unable longer to hold his peace, "no, nor never thought of it."

"Mr. Hallowell," said Joanna, highly exasperated, "will you be so good as to let me manage my own affairs? Theodora," turning wrathfully on her younger sister, "you needn't suppose I'm going to stand this sort of thing from you, no, nor yet grandfather ain't! If you'll come home with me and ask pardon humbly, as I said afore, and promise solemnly that you'll never do such a thing again, I'll may be try to overlook it—if not—"

"Well?" Dora's large, lovely eyes were lifted, full of mute, passionate defiance.

"Then," said Joanna, "I wash my hands of you, now and forever—and you need never dare show yourself under my roof again."

"Then I won't!" cried Dora, half choked with resentful passion, at thus being treated like a truant child. "Go your way, and I'll go mine!"

And, flinging the camlet cloak around her, with wild, impulsive grace of a tragedy queen, she vanished into the throng.

For a moment Joanna Beck and Reuben Hallowell sat staring at each other as if hardly able to believe the evidence of their own senses.

"She ain't in earnest, is she?" gasped poor Reuben at last, with falling lower jaw and eyes expressive of blank dismay.

"I don't know whether she is or not," said Miss Joanna, recovering herself at last. "But *I* am. Drive on, Reuben Hollowell, if you please."

"Where?" said Reuben, staring vacantly at the strong-minded spinster.

"Home!"

"What! without her?"

"Yes," Joanna answered, sharply.

"I'll not do that, blamed if I do!" spoke up the young farmer, with more spirit and energy than he had previously displayed. "I came here for Dora, and I ain't going back without her. That's flat."

"I'd like to know how you propose to find her among all this pack of fools and idiots?" said Joanna, with incredulous sarcasm.

"I'll *look* for her, anyhow," responded Reuben, shaking the reins over his lymphatic old horse's back, as if it were his intention to drive straight through the canvas sides of the "fat lady's" tent, in the direction which Dora's vanishing form had taken.

Joanna Beck turned a deep mahogany red with anger.

"I won't, then," said she, stepping nimbly out of the equipage. "And if you won't take me home, Mr. Reuben Hollowell, I can return in David Wabley's carryall that I saw just now, half full of soda-water bottles and root-beer, just by the outside ticket gates."

And in spite of Hollowell's remonstrances she kept her word.

While poor Reuben, driving aimlessly about the crowded race-ground, shouted at by policemen, and railed at by the pedestrians, was straining his eyes vainly for a sight of pretty Dora and the red camlet cloak.

And when at last the gay pageant of the day was over, the greensward and dusty race-course deserted, and the dewy purple stillness of the evening settled down over pine thickets and solitary glades, he drove sadly away from the post where he had been eagerly scrutinizing the concourse of home-returning pleasure-seekers, trying to cheer himself with the belief that Dora was no doubt safe at home.

He checked his horse in front of the Lombardy poplars, where a solitary light shone out across the road, when at last he reached the well-known spot.

"Has Dora got home?" he called out, striving to speak confidently. And Miss Joanna's sharp, hard voice answered: "No!"

CHAPTER IV.

MISS SUSAN SOPER.

AND what had become of Theodora all this time?

Flushed and excited, and with a sore angry throbbing at her heart, she had buried herself in the surging crowd, careless of all surroundings, and only anxious to hide herself away from her sister and Reuben Hallowell.

"How dare they speak so to me?" she murmured, between her closed lips, unconsciously condemning honest Reuben in the same category with Joanna. "How dare they look at me in that insolent, domineering manner? I will submit to their insults no longer. I will be *free*! Am I not sixteen years old? Is there any reason that I should humiliate myself in the dust at their will?"

She had paused to look neither to one side nor the other, but frantically made her way toward the further entrance of the race-ground, ran, rather than walked over the slopes of green grass that lay between the inclosure and the distant high-road, and never paused until, at the crest of a gently wooded knoll she was compelled to stop and recover her wildly fluttering breath.

Far away, she could see the glittering flags of the race-course, with the crowd blackening the turf, the oval white line of the course, and the tiers upon tiers of the fast-thinning grand stand; and in spite of the mingled terror and anger of her untutored heart, a strange sense of exultation took possession of her.

She had broken the bonds that fastened her to that wretched, drudging life at home—she was *free*!

She threw aside the cumbersome folds of the red cloak, and sat down under a spreading beech-tree, with the south wind fanning her forehead, and tried to resolve what it would be best to do next.

For a girl of sixteen years old, brought up in the limited sphere of a country farm-house, has but a slender stock of experience to draw upon in a sudden emergency like this.

"I will go to Susan Soper!" she thought, starting up at last. "*She* will advise me; she will tell me what to do. She has often told me that I was burying myself alive in that dismal old house with grandfather and Joanna."

And with new energy, she set forth upon the long, hot walk across the fields to the village.

Fortunately for her, the streets were almost as deserted as those of an enchanted city in the sultry hush of the July mid-afternoon. The elms, that met in a sort of overarching arcade in the center of the broad, quiet street, scarcely stirred in the tropical stillness of the afternoon—the plate-glass fronts of the gay shops and bazaars flashed back the westering sunshine, and scarcely a footfall sounded on the burning pavements. Here and there a sleepy old gentleman nodded over his newspaper on the broad veranda of some monster hotel, or a group of children played in the grounds, under the surveillance of their white-capped *bonnes*. The clerks, yawning at the shop-doors, stared as the slight little figure in the quaint red cloak and startled dark eyes flitted by—and the colored porter, who was sprinkling the pavement in front of the Grand Union Hotel, before the afternoon trains should bring a re-enforcement of noise and bustle, looked dubiously at her, as she paused at the foot of the majestic flight of steps which led up to the superbly colonnaded portico.

“Got any business with the housekeeper?” said he, checking the cool spray that fell so gratefully on the hissing flags.

“I wanted to see Miss Soper, if you please,” hesitated Dora.

“Oh!” said the man, civilly enough; “it’s Miss Ravenel’s maid, ain’t it? Just step upstairs—it’s No. 443.”

Miss Ravenel’s room, on the second floor of the monster hotel, was large and cool and airy, with windows opening into the green, shadowy boughs of the elms, and commanding a view beyond Congress Park, with its green slopes and templed springs, where a band of music was playing one of Strauss’s dreamy waltzes, and the Oriental glitter of fountains sparkled mistily through the air. The carpet was of velvet-soft Axminster, the chairs and sofas of blue puffed brocade, and the curtains of dark-blue brocatel, lined with embroidered lace—and in the midst of all this sumptuousness reclined Miss Susan Soper, in a French cambric dress, with her hair done up in puffs and a novel in her hands—a middle-aged and rather sour-looking female, with whitish-blue eyes, a freckled complexion, and a sharp, thin nose, with a curious little hump upon its bridge like a dromedary’s back. She started at the knock that broke in upon the love rhapsodies of the Lady Isabel in the copy of “East Lynne” that she was reading.

“It ain’t never Miss Ravenel come back,” said Susan Soper, flinging the novel under the sofa, as she made haste to

respond to the summons. "Oh! it's Dora Beck; ain't it?" in accents half of vexation half of relief. "Well, I should like to know what brings *you* here at this time o' day, with your face the color of a carnation and your boots all dust, and that outlandish gypsy cloak on!"

Dora laughed hysterically as she caught sight of herself in the broad sheet of an opposite mirror which extended from ceiling to floor.

"It *does* look strange, doesn't it?" said she. "But oh, it's a deal stranger than it looks, Susan Soper!"

Miss Soper stared harder than ever.

"Dora Beck," said she, "what on earth do you mean?"

"I've run away!" said Dora Beck. "That's what I mean!"

"Well, I never!" said Miss Soper. "Run away from *who*?"

"From Joanna!" cried the girl. "And from Reuben Hallowell. And if you betray me to either of them, Susan Soper," she added, with a gasping sob, "I'll never forgive you!"

"You're safe enough as far as *I* am concerned," said Miss Soper. "I should have run away long ago if I had been you. So you've broke loose at last, have you? And what are you going to do now?"

Dora had sunk helplessly down on a low Turkish ottoman, with the golden hair hanging like a veil about her face, and the deep color burning on her cheeks, while her eyes glistened with a strange and feverish luster.

"I don't know," said she. "I have come to you to advise me!"

"Well," said Miss Soper, rather dubiously, "before I do anything of that sort, you'd better begin at the beginning and tell me all about it?"

"I couldn't tell you all, if I were to try," said Dora, wildly. "They've scolded me, and lectured me, and treated me like a three-year-old baby, until I couldn't endure it any longer."

"Exactly," said Miss Soper. "Don't I know Joanna Beck and her overbearing ways?"

"Yes," added Dora, "and then I wanted to go to the races, and Joanna and grandfather said I shouldn't. And I got up before daylight and crept out at the back door and gave them all the slip."

"No!" cried Susan Soper, evidently rather impressed with the spirit and enterprise of the little golden-haired lassie who sat there before her, like a bending wild flower.

"Yes, I did!" cried Dora, exultantly. "But Joanna and Reuben Hallowell came after me, and—"

"I'll wager they did," said Miss Soper, excitedly. "Like two cats after a mouse."

"And they scolded me," went on Dora, with a tremulous voice, "and called me such hard names—and they said—that is, Joanna said—that I should never come back under her roof again. So I cried out, in a passion, that I never would—and I dashed away from them and came here."

"And they don't know where you are?"

"Of course not," Dora answered, with a nervous glance over her shoulder, as if she half expected to see Miss Joanna's tall figure gliding up behind her. "How should they?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Susan Soper, meditatively biting her nails. "Perhaps knowing, as they do, that you and I have always been friends, they'll bethink themselves to come here and inquire."

"And if they do?" cried Dora, in a panic of dismay, as she clasped her hands together.

"I shall tell 'em I don't know anything about you," said Miss Soper, coolly.

Dora flung both arms about her neck, crying out, "Oh, Susan, how good you are!"

"You needn't choke me to death on that account," said Susan, remonstratingly.

"And what shall I do?" questioned Dora, nervously wringing her hands.

"I don't know," answered Susan Soper, smoothing down the folds of her cambric dress where Dora's inconsiderate embrace had crumpled it. "There's time enough to think about that."

"But I must go somewhere," went on Dora, pleadingly. "I can't stay here."

"I ain't so certain about that," nodded Miss Soper, oracularly. "If things had happened to suit your case exactly, Dora Beck, they couldn't have turned out better. Miss Ravenel has gone up to Lake George with a party of camping-out ladies and gentlemen, where the valets and ladies'-maids all have to be left behind. And she is to be gone a week certain, and may be more; and what's to hinder your staying here with me, and looking out, quiet and peaceable like, for a good situation with some lady?"

"Oh, Susan!" Dora cried, ecstatically.

"And I dare say," added Susan Soper, who was not at all averse to the idea of patronizing a young beauty like the old

farmer's rebellious granddaughter, "that I can give you a few ideas about dress-making and bonnet-trimming, and that sort of thing, and my recommendation will go a great way with some ladies that I could name. So you see there ain't the least occasion in life for fretting, and you'd best step into Miss Ravenel's bedroom and lay off your things, and try and get a little of the dust off your face, while I go down and see if I can get one of the waiters to give me a cup of tea."

Little Dora looked timidly around at the splendors of Miss Ravenel's own private apartment, when she was left alone—at the clouds of filmy lace that hung like a vapor around the bed, the superb mirrors and the low satin sofas, the gilded dressing-case and elaborately ornamented chiffoniers—the cut-glass cologne-bottles and powder-boxes, the Russia-leather glove-cases and Swiss handkerchief-boxes, and a score of other dainty toilet accessories, whose very names she was as yet unacquainted with.

"If I could be a lady's-maid, like Susan Soper," she thought, involuntarily clasping her hands, "and handle such beautiful things as these every day! Oh! I am so glad that I ran away!"

Susan Soper came back presently with a cup of steaming tea, and a tray of bread and butter and cold ham, cut in dainty pink slices, which poor Dora, who had tasted nothing all day, devoured like a famished creature. The strong tea refreshed her like a draught of wine; the food revived her, and she sat eagerly watching Miss Soper as she opened and shut the various wardrobe doors, in search of some dress which she had received orders to alter during the absence of her mistress.

"Oh, Susan!" cried she, as she caught a glimpse of something white and glittering within the tallest of the wardrobe doors, "what an exquisite dress!"

"I believe you," nodded Susan. "It's Undine, for a fancy masquerade."

"It's--what?" timidly repeated Dora, whose acquaintance with imaginative literature was, as may be supposed, not extensive.

"Undine," repeated Susan Soper. "Don't you know? The water spirit."

She unlocked the door again, and took out a glittering fabrication of white tulle, besprinkled all over with crystals, in imitation of water-drops, braided with long grass and sedges, and trimmed around the corsage with half-open water-lily buds and leaves. The underskirt, of watered white silk, was

bordered with lily leaves and buds also, and a wreath of crystal rain-drops and grasses to decorate the hair, in accordance with the rest of the toilet, was tacked to the belt.

Dora stood breathlessly before it, with clasped hands, and eyes shining like deep stars.

"Is it for—a party?" she asked, in a low, eager voice.

"For a fancy-dress ball," said Miss Soper, complacently, as she turned the dress around and around, arranging here a cluster of grasses and there adjusting a lovely velvet lily leaf so that it should not obscure the snow-hearted bud beside it. "It's to come off in the great ball-room here to-night. There's the admission tickets in the dressing-box now—the white one, with the gilded edge. But, you see, the camping-out business drove the whole thing out of Miss Ravenel's head. However, there'll most likely be plenty more masquerades during the season, and she'll have chances enough to wear the dress, never fear."

"Susan!" Dora spoke the word under her breath, and with cheeks all aglow.

"Well?" Miss Soper was engaged in pulling out the long white watered silk train under the tulle draperies.

"How I should like to try on that dress!"

"Nonsense!" said Susan, brusquely.

"Do let me, Susan!" urged the girl; "just once. I'll be so careful. I'll not hurt it the least bit in the world. Dear Susan *do!*"

Miss Soper shook her head, relentless to the pleading accents of her companion.

"Are you crazy?" said she. "Do you know how much this dress is worth? A real imported costume, that can't be matched, not if you was to go up and down Broadway on your knees. And the tulle as frail as vanity, and the beautiful French flowers and crystal water-drops, as I hardly dare even to look at."

"But I tell you, Susan, I won't hurt it," entreated Dora, with her eyes riveted to the beautiful dress with its ideal trimmings.

"No, you won't," nodded Susan Soper. "And good reason why—because you'll not have the chance."

She hung the dress carefully up in that special compartment of the wardrobe which was reserved for its occupancy, locked the mirror-fronted door with a complacent little "snap," and dropped the key into her pocket.

"And now, Dora Beck," said she, "I should advise you to lie down on the sofa and rest a little, or sleep if you can; be-

cause I'm going out to tea with Mrs. Major Ashburton's maid and two or three other genteel friends."

"Are you?" Dora looked blankly at Miss Soper as that damsel took her thin light hair out of its multitudinous crimping papers, powdered her complexion into a mealy whiteness, and proceeded to exchange her cambric dress for one of cheap, changeable silk, and thought how lonely she—Dora—would be, in that great, high-ceiled, perfumed room.

"I'm sorry I can't take you," went on Miss Soper; "but this is a special invite occasion, and I shouldn't venture to introduce any friend without permission. And besides, you ain't dressed exactly for a tea-party."

"Ah, no," said Dora, involuntarily reddening as she glanced down at her dusty boots and the bedraggled hem of her poor pitiful dress, and *felt* how shabby her lace frills must be by this time.

"So if you will excuse," said Susan Soper, "I'll try not to be longer that I can help. I will ask my friend the head-waiter to send you up a little bite of something at tea-time, and I dare say you will be glad of the chance to sleep."

"When do you think you shall be back?" dolorously asked Dora.

"Oh, I don't know. Ten or eleven o'clock, I dare say."

And with a farewell glance at the mirror and a complacent arrangement of her pink ribbon cross, Miss Susan Soper departed.

CHAPTER V.

"UNDINE."

As soon as the clang of the great door conveyed to Dora Beck's mind the conviction that she was left quite alone, she glanced around with a frightened look, as if the waving curtains and the level rays of the afternoon sunshine that found their way through the clustering elm leaves, and the other little Doras that looked at her with startled eyes from the mirror linings of the panels were so many lurking ghosts. And she would have burst out into a hearty crying fit, if she had not remembered just in time that she was sixteen years old and had just run away.

"Sleep," said Dora to herself, "I couldn't sleep a wink, with all these troubled thoughts and fancies crowding through my brain."

And so, by way of diverting her mind, she knelt down on the carpet close to the window, leaning her elbows on the sill,

looked out into the gay street below, and across to the park, where the music was still playing, and the promenaders were beginning to flock in, to drink the spring waters and enjoy the delicious coolness of the sunset.

The street had lost its enchanted city aspect by this time. With the westering shadows and the fresh breeze that had sprung up, the fashionable world had seemed to pour out with one accord from the broad piazzas and colonnaded verandas of the hotels. Superbly dressed ladies, lovely, as Dora rapturously thought, as if they had stepped bodily out of the Paris fashion-plates in the dress-maker's window, glided up and down the pavement with a rustle of fleecy muslin or shimmering silk behind them, tiny parasols like magnified flowers, and such bonnets as Dora had never before dreamed of—handsome cavaliers, as unlike poor Reuben Hallowell as if they belonged to a different race, sauntered languidly at their sides—glittering carriages crowded each other in the broad shaded street, and parties of gay equestrians sped by with laughter floating on the breeze and upturned faces so full of happy exhilaration that impulsive Dora smiled in answer to their smiles as if the greeting had been intended especially for herself."

"Oh," cried Dora, speaking aloud, in the tumultuous fullness of her heart, as a breeze of triumphal music reached her from the string band in the park. "I never thought Saratoga could be like *this*!"

And in good truth, Saratoga, as she had seen it heretofore under Joanna's auspices, when they trudged in with baskets of laundried clothes, creeping along through the back streets and stealing into the basement entrance of the hotels, was a very different Saratoga from that upon which her eyes rested this evening.

"Why was I not born in a sphere like this?" the girl asked herself, envyingly. "But still, would it not be better to be lady's-maid to one of these fair, haughty creatures, whose tiny feet scarcely touch the pavement, and whose dress rustles along like a silken surf behind her, than to drudge on at home forever with Joanna scolding, and nothing but calico dresses to wear? At all events, I mean to try it."

And Dora rose valorously to her feet, and began to pace restlessly up and down the floor.

The soft, fragrant darkness of the summer twilight had descended over the rustling tree-tops; the street lamps shone up like stars, here and there, and the rows of lights above the hotel portals glittered like blotches of fire. The omnibuses and carriages from the incoming trains were rattling noisily by

—a hum of cheerful voices rose up from the verandas below—and still Dora sat there alone. At last a smiling colored man tapped at the door, with a little tray of supper.

“For de young lady in Miss Ravenel’s room,” said he. “An’ I mustn’t stay long, for I’s done got to help wax de floors in de big ball-room for de hop to-night.”

He went away again, and Dora eat her supper and pondered still longer about the glories of the masquerade ball.

All of a sudden she sprung up and turned on the gas-burner which the colored man had already lighted.

“Why didn’t I think of it before?” said she, aloud, as she danced up and down on the tips of her little weary toes. “The key is in Susan’s calico pocket—the dress hanging in the wardrobe. I *will* try it on.”

She drew together the blue brocatel curtains, as if fearful lest even the stars and the rustling elm leaves should witness her escapade, and then, with tremulous fingers, put her slender hand into the depths of the dress which Susan Soper had left hanging upon a row of pegs behind the door, drew out the key, and unlocked the wardrobe door:

There hung the glittering dress, all misty white and pale sea green, with the half-open buds seeming actually to unfold in the semi-light, and the crystal water-drops sparkling all over it like powdered diamonds—and it was the work of scarcely five minutes for Dora to fling aside the poor little pink polonaise which she had thought so beautiful a short twenty-four hours ago, and assume the exquisite French costume which served to transform her into a different person. With trembling hands she fastened the fringes of crystal and trailing grass into her golden braids, and drew on a pair of white kid gloves which lay in the Russia-leather glove-box—the first kid gloves which our little country damsel had ever worn, and which she thought excruciatingly tight.

“But they do make my hands look so small!” thought Dora, as she viewed them with exultant delight.

She walked once or twice up and down the room, listening rapturously to the soft sweep of her white silk robe over the mossy carpet; she viewed herself, almost incredulously, in the expanse of glistening mirror.

“Am I really the little drudging Dora of the old farmhouse?” she asked herself, with a soft little peal of laughter. “Or am I a fairy princess, ready to float away into a magic castle of pearl and gold? And where is my fairy prince?”

Instinctively as she uttered the careless words, her mind reverted to the dark eyes and rich olive complexion of the hand-

some stranger of the Saratoga race-ground; the hot color rose to her cheeks, and she involuntarily turned away from the tell-tale reflections of the mirror.

"How silly I am," thought she. "As if it were likely that I should ever see him again."

At the same moment her eye chanced to fall on the ball-ticket lying against the white-lined lid of Miss Ravenel's pearl-mounted dressing-case; she caught it up, with an electric glitter of the deep-brown eyes.

"It's destiny!" she cried; "destiny, and nothing else. The fairy princess story is begun, but not ended. For one night, at least, I *will* live in the world of my dreams!"

She caught up the white silk opera-cloak edged with a fringe of the softest white ostrich plumes, and drew its coquettish hood over her head, and the next moment she was gliding along the broad veranda of the inside court, all studded with lamps and looking out into shady lawns with trees murmuring overhead and a fountain plashing in the middle.

"Why shouldn't I go to a ball as well as Cinderella?" said pretty Dora to herself, her eyes shining full of half-terrified delight under the snowy fringe of her opera hood.

Mr. Musard Falkland had had a herculean task of it to induce his young English friend to attend the fancy-dress gathering in the great ball-room of the Grand Union Hotel that night. Basil Branchley, with a novel in his hand, a cigar in his mouth, and a reclining-chair drawn up in the very coolest corner of his room, was so exceedingly comfortable that he at first absolutely declined to stir.

"Why should I go down into that place, all gas-light and patchouli?" said he, impatiently, when his friend importuned him to lay aside the enchanting pages of "Monte-Cristo." "Haven't I had enough of crowds and crushes for one day in that ill-managed race-course of yours?"

Falkland looked at him in despair—so handsome, so immovable, so utterly unheeding of all argument or remonstrance.

"But look here, Branchley," said he, "this won't do!"

"Why won't it do?"

Branchley laid down the book, clasped his hands at the back of his head, and prepared to battle the question inch by inch.

"You promised Miss Montchessington."

"Did I? Well, she'll never think of it again."

"And really, if you expect to see anything of American society—"

"My dear fellow, did I ever lead you to suppose that that was my idea in visiting this country?"

"No," Falkland answered; "but one would naturally suppose that a fancy-dress ball at a place like this would have some attraction for a man under thirty."

"You see, I've had so much of that sort of thing at home," said Branchley, suppressing an incipient yawn.

"Oh, come now, old fellow," urged Falkland. "Don't back down in this sort of way, unless you want to ruin my credit forever with Miss Montchessington, and the Blossoms, and that set."

"Oh, if you put it on the ground of personal friendship," said Mr. Branchley, with a slight, deprecatory motion of the hand.

"I do!" cried Falkland, eagerly.

"Then I suppose the sacrifice has got to be made. But mind"—with a peremptory contraction of the brows—"I don't bargain for more than half an hour of it. There are limits to a man's endurance."

The full band was playing a lively galop of Offenbach's when the two young men lounged into the ball-room, with its flower-garlanded walls and brilliant waxed floor—the Englishman, with his fair, handsome face set off by a white camellia in his button-hole, and all the accessories of the irreproachable full dress, for Musard Falkland's entreaties had been unavailing to induce him to assume any fancy costume.

"If I can't go as I please, I won't go at all," said he, resolutely; and Falkland had been compelled to submit.

He put up his eyeglass as he entered, looking carelessly around at the Evenings, the Mornings, the Italian Flower Venders, and the Swiss Peasant Girls who were whirling over the floor or waiting anxiously among the banks of wall-flowers that lined the sides of the room for possible partners. But all of a sudden the critical expression vanished from his face, and a sudden light of recognition flashed into his eyes, as he observed a beautiful Undine in white, with a braiding of lily buds and grasses around her dress, and crystal water-drops sparkling all over her—a golden-haired girl, with roses glowing in her cheeks, and the loveliest dark eyes that ever his gaze had rested on.

"Falkland," said he, "who is that girl—the one by the open window, with grasses and dew-drops in her hair, and a dress trimmed with green?"

"Which one?" Falkland was staring here and there in the most impossible of places, with the provoking obtuseness which people sometimes display on such occasions.

"Not there, man—not there," whispered Branchley, seiz-

ing his arm, as if, by physical force, he could turn him aside in the right direction. "Just beyond the enormously fat lady in the pink silk. Don't you see?"

"Oh!" said Falkland, with coolness; "I *do* see now. Yellow-haired, isn't she? with big, dark eyes, and a white tulle dress over satin, and attired as Undine, the Water-Spirit?"

"Yes, I know," cried Basil Branchley, impatiently, "but who *is* it?"

"How should I know?" said Falkland, laughing. "Though, stay—didn't I hear? yes, I did—that Miss Ravenel, from Syracuse, was to appear as Undine."

"Miss Ravenel?" repeated Branchley. "Then it was all a masquerade from beginning to end!"

"What was all a masquerade?"

"Never mind," answered Branchley, hurriedly. "Will you introduce me?"

"Unfortunately, my dear fellow, I can not, not having the pleasure of a personal acquaintance with the fair Undine," Falkland replied, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Then I shall introduce myself."

"Nonsense!"

"Ah, you don't understand," said Branchley. "You do not know that I have already a partial acquaintance with the golden-tressed Undine?"

And he crossed the floor with a swift, careless stride, while Falkland looked after him in amazement.

"They talk of American assurance," thought he, "but upon my word, I think the English article exceeds it. I shall like to see how the haughty Ravenel will freeze Branchley with a glance."

But he was disappointed.

Basil Branchley walked coolly up to the beautiful Undine and bowed low.

"Miss Ravenel," said he, "you are discovered. You must plead guilty, and recommend yourself to the mercy of the court."

Dora looked up blushing and confused, but prettier than ever.

"I—I don't understand you," said she.

"Then you will not confess yourself to be the gypsy fortune-teller of the race-ground this morning?"

The wine-brown eyes sparkled into his face, full of mischief—the rosey lips broke into a smile.

"Why should I not confess it?" said she. "Yes, I was the gypsy fortune-teller!"

“And now you appear as the fairest and most ideal of Undines. If I had only known, I would have ordered a costume as Knight Huldbrand.”

Dora played nervously with the crystal drops at the edge of her sleeve; she did not at all understand these classic allusions.

“The band is playing a delicious waltz,” said Branchley, lowering his voice to a tone scarcely above a whisper. “Will you honor me?”

And little Dora, to whom the very word “waltz” conveyed all that was delightful and entertaining in the world, floated away in the dreamy curves of a motion that seemed absolutely divine.

“He takes me for Miss Ravenel,” she thought. “Oh, how, how shall I ever escape from this net-work of duplicity? But for the present, at least, I need only enjoy myself.”

CHAPTER VI.

“YOU CAN NOT STAY HERE.”

THE clock was striking midnight as Miss Soper started from an uncomfortable sleep in her chair, and beheld by the dim light of the gas-burner a radiant vision in white and crystal, with golden hair streaming down over her back, and eyes shining like stars under their long lashes.

“Well, I never!” said Miss Soper.

“Of course you didn’t, Susan,” said Dora, merrily dancing into the room. “Nor I—nor anybody else. Tell me, how do I look?”

Susan’s grim face relaxed into an involuntary smile.

“I couldn’t hardly believe it was you,” said she, “when I peeped into the ball-room door and see you a-waltzing with that young Englishman as they say is heir to an earldom.”

“What!” cried Dora, flinging herself in a glittering heap on the floor at Susan’s side. “Heir to an earldom. Do you really mean it, Susan?”

“So they say anyhow,” nodded the lady’s-maid. “And when I’ve been doing up Miss Ravenel’s hair I’ve heard her and the young ladies laugh about which of ’em should set their caps for him.”

“Does she know him, Susan?”

“How should she, child,” said Susan, with some asperity, “when he didn’t come to Saratoga until she had gone to Lake George three days? But now get up and take off that dress—I hope to gracious it ain’t ruined.”

“It isn’t hurt in the least,” Dora saucily retorted. “Just

see," spreading out her diaphanous skirts with a coquettish courtesy, "every bead and crystal pendant is as perfect as it ever was. The tulle may be the least bit crumpled with dancing, but I can easily iron it out again—and oh, Susan, I have had *such* an evening. I danced four times with Mr. Branchley—that's his name, Susan—and once with another gentleman, who wasn't nearly so graceful and stepped on my toes. And we had water ices and Charlottes, and—only think, Susan, *real* champagne. And he asked if I'd be at the Congress Spring to-morrow, and I said no, I preferred the Washington Spring water."

"Upon—my—word!" said Miss Soper.

"Wasn't it airish of me, though?" cried Dora, with dancing eyes and cheeks all mantling with roses. "But I will be there, you'll see, at nine o'clock."

"Where?"

"At the Washington Spring."

"Dora," said Miss Soper, warningly, "do you know what you are doing?"

"Perfectly well," nodded Dora. "I'm having the splendorous time in the world—just exactly like the heroine of a novel. And, Susan dear, darling Susan, *do* lend me one of Miss Ravenel's dresses just for to-morrow?"

"Do you want to lose me my place?" demanded the lady's-maid, recoiling at the idea.

"It needn't lose you your place," urged Dora. "Don't be a crab, Susan; Miss Ravenel isn't here; she'll never know it. And oh, Susan, I *must* see him once more."

Susan Soper was but mortal, and Dora Beck's coaxing little ways would have melted a heart of stone; and the upshot of it all was that when the next morning's sun gilded the tops of the tall trees under which the Washington Spring gurgled out like a magnified diamond, she sauntered with all a fine lady's airs and graces up to the aristocratic circle which surrounded the low rail and drank her glass of cool sparkling spring water as if she had been accustomed to the *dolce far niente* life all her days.

As she stood there in a dress of rich black silk, with a Spanish hat drooping over her brow and a rose-lined parasol in her hand a familiar voice smote on her ear—Reuben Hallowell's voice shouting in stentorian accents to his old horse Bonny in the elm-shaded street beyond.

"Hey, there! What ye 'bout, old feller?" he bawled. "Hadn't we better stop here and inquire, Joanna? You said *all* the hotels."

Dora turned pale and trembled as she glanced up under the shadow of the Spanish hat at Miss Joanna, sitting upright in the wagon in the road without, and Reuben pulling desperately at old Bonny's reins. She could have flung a stone into the wagon. Reuben himself, if he had chosen to stretch out his whip-lash, could have touched the rose-wreathed brim of her hat.

There was a moment's discussion, during which Dora's heart seemed almost to stand still, and then they jogged on, without alighting. She turned back to the spring with a sigh of relief.

"How silly I am," she thought. "As if Joanna could possibly recognize me in such a dress as this, with a real Leghorn hat, and a thread-lace parasol."

At the same moment a low, deep voice sounded in her ear:

"Miss Ravenel."

And looking up, she met the earnest, chivalrous gaze of Basil Branchley. The color rose into her cheek.

"Have you been here long?" he asked. "Will you allow me to walk down to the Congress Park with you?"

And side by side they strolled along under the great trees to the terraced lawns of the beautiful park, where the band had already begun to play. A strange, fluttering sense of elation filled Dora's heart; she felt like one who walks in the mazes of a dream, and expects, every moment, to awake to the dull realities of every-day life. She was quite silent, but this very silence enchanted Basil Branchley. He had dreamed of her all night long; he had pondered all the morning of the beautiful Undine vision which had crossed his path so unexpectedly. She had impressed him with a strange fascination, which as yet he scarcely understood.

"I say, old fellow," Musard Falkland had said to him at the breakfast-table, "you were rather hard hit with Miss Ravenel last night."

"She is the only really beautiful woman I have seen in America," said Branchley, rather shortly.

"But isn't she a little—just a little, you know—what one might call *eccentric*, with her fortune-telling and her odd, brusque manners?"

"I wouldn't give a fig for a woman who is exactly like all the rest of the world," retorted Branchley, curtly.

And the more he thought about the beautiful fortune-teller of the race-ground, the exquisite Undine of the ball-room, the more he was interested and attracted. In fact, Mr. Branchley was desperately in love without being aware of the fact.

And, as he stood beside her under the huge forest trees of the park, with the music of the band playing softly below, the robins trilling overhead, and the rainbow crowd coming and going on the plateaus of the terraced banks, he thought he had never seen so exquisite a face in his life.

"Miss Ravenel," said he, abruptly, "how long shall you remain at Saratoga?"

"I—I don't know," Dora answered, tracing a pattern in the graveled path at her feet with the ivory point of her parasol.

"Do you like it?"

"Oh, so much!"

"Have you driven out to the lake yet?"

"No."

"I should like to take you there," said he, eagerly.

She did not answer; her startled gaze was riveted on a tall advancing figure in mauve muslin, with two or three others, along the walk—the very Miss Egerton whose dresses she had so often brought home, packed in Joanna's splint basket, and whose bank-bills she had received with the meekest of courtesies.

"Oh, Mr. Branchley!" cried Miss Egerton, bearing down upon the young Englishman like a royal frigate in full sail, with a flutter of flounces—(Dora herself had helped to flute them)—a waving scarf, and a white parasol, with which she vehemently beckoned—"where have you hidden yourself all this time? We want to consult you about the picnic at the lake. And here are Kate Walsingham and Marjorie Trevor, and—"

Basil Branchley bit his lip with scarcely repressed annoyance; he answered as briefly as was consistent with ordinary politeness, but when he turned back again, his companion was gone.

Gone—vanished—utterly disappeared like a floating cloud from the blue heaven above, as a bird into the woods. He could hardly believe his own vision at first; he hurried along the path, believing that Miss Ravenel had become wearied of the discussion and strolled on—he scrutinized the group around the fountain, the little knots at the various springs, but all in vain.

"I don't understand it at all," said he to himself. "Have I unwillingly offended her? Does she suppose that I intended to be rude? I wish that withered old coquette of a Miss Egerton had been in Jericho before she broke in on us, just then, of all times in the world!"

While little Dora, with her heart yet wildly throbbing with her terror of the recognition which she had so narrowly escaped, was flying swiftly down the path, escaping at the side gate which opened on a peaceful and unfrequented street, and hurrying back to the hotel as fast as her feet would carry her.

"Oh, Susan!" cried she, bursting into the cool room at the Grand Union Hotel, with golden curls all blown about, and rosy lips apart, "such an adventure! But"—stopping short, as she observed the expression in Susan Soper's face, "what is the matter?"

"Matter enough," Miss Soper answered, sourly. "Take off that dress this instant, Theodora Beck. We've come to an end of all this figuring around in borrowed plumes like the jackdaw in the fable. I've got a telegram from Miss Ravenel, and she's to be home this evening."

Dora stood dismayed in the middle of the floor, the pink-lined parasol in one hand, the Spanish hat in the other, with its deep-rose ribbons trailing on the floor.

"Oh, Susan!" said she, "what am I to do?"

"Do," repeated Miss Soper, tartly, "why, you didn't suppose this sort of thing could go on forever, did you? And I only hope my mistress won't suspicion what's been going on; but I've my doubts about it. However, one thing's very plain—you can't stay *here*!"

"No," said Dora, faintly, her heart seeming to turn to a lump of ice within her. For the strange fantastic life that she had led during the last twenty-four hours had begun to assume an aspect of such intense reality that she could not bear to contemplate relapsing once more into the drudgery of ordinary existence. Her excitable, gypsy temperament had absolutely reveled in this new life; she felt that she could no more go back to the past than one who has slaked his thirst with champagne can return contentedly to cold water.

"Of course," added Susan, "you must go somewhere."

"Of course," mechanically echoed Dora.

"And I think—I do really think," said Miss Soper, busy with the frills of an apron, "that you'd better reconsider the matter and go back home again."

"Never!" Dora uttered the word with flaming cheeks and eyes that seemed to flash electric fire.

"It's no use being a fool," said Susan, crisply. "Home is home, if everything ain't quite so smooth there, and a giddy-headed young girl like you is a deal better off there than anywhere else."

"Susan," said Dora, in a stifled voice, "you may as well

leave off talking about that. I'll never, never go back to Joanna again—not if I starve first.”

“Starving ain't so easy,” said Susan Soper, with a shrug of the shoulders. “And she was here this morning.”

“Who?” cried Dora.

“Joanna.”

“To see you?”

“Yes, to see me.”

“What did you tell her?” ejaculated Dora, breathlessly, while the sudden color rose into her cheeks.

“I told her I didn't know where you was,” said Susan, bluntly. “And it was true enough, I didn't know whether you was sitting in the back veranda, hearing the band play, or drinking the abominable tasting water at the springs, or pricking bead baskets at the Indian encampment. And I can tell you that great honest-looking farmer fellow that was with her was pretty well cut up about it!”

Dora gave her head an impatient toss. “But tell me,” said she, “what did Joanna say?”

“She was vexed enough—declared that you had always been more bother than you were worth.”

“That is just like Joanna,” said Dora, indignantly.

“But the young man—Hallowell, is his name?—he silenced her at once and said that no one should dare to blame you in his hearing.”

“The great clown!” cried Dora, in nowise pacified by poor Reuben's well-meant intercessions. “As if it were any of *his* business! But oh, Susan, tell me what to do, now.”

“You must try for some sort of a place, I suppose,” said Susan, ungraciously.

Dora pondered the idea with downcast eyes, and restless little foot eagerly patting the floor. To descend from the aerial heights of her fairy existence to the ordinary toil and worry of the workaday world, was an alternative not joyously to be welcomed. But, in so far as she could see, there was no help for it. Bread must be eaten and shoe leather bought, and child as she was in all the realities of life, Dora Beck could not but recognize the facts.

“Susan,” said she, “I should like to get a place like yours. I should like to be a lady's-maid.”

“I dare say,” said Susan Soper, straightening herself up. “Lady's-maid places don't grow on every bush like blackberries. And you'll have to take what you can get, and be thankful for it.”

"But, Susan," pleaded Dora, "don't you know of any place that I could get?"

"No, I don't," Miss Soper uncompromisingly answered. "P'r'aps I could have found one if I'd had a little time, but it's quite out of the question now."

Dora wrung her hands. "Oh, what shall I do?" cried she, "what shall I do?"

"What I advised you," said Susan, grimly. "Go home and make the best you can of affairs there."

"No," said Dora, with an emphatic stamp of her little foot, "that is quite decided. I will *not* go home."

"Well," said Susan, indifferently, "you know you can not stay *here*!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE SILVER SPOUT.

"MISS RAVENEL?"

Basil Branchley was standing under the superb elms in front of the hotel when Captain Despard uttered the name. The color flushed up to his face; he started involuntarily.

"Yes," said Captain Despard, carelessly throwing his cigar into the street, "Gerty Ravenel—the prettiest girl at Saratoga Springs. There she comes now, with Miss Collingwood."

Branchley's inquiring gaze roved up the street and down, with a passionate eagerness of search, but all in vain.

"I do not see her?" said he.

"Then you must be blind," said Captain Despard. "The tall girl with the blue dress and the lace scarf that is fluttering in the breeze. Stop a minute—I'll introduce you. Miss Ravenel," as the party drew near, "we are delighted to see you back again at the Springs. Allow me to present my friend Mr. Branchley."

Mechanically Basil Branchley bowed, but in his secret heart he could scarcely control his surprise and bewilderment. Was he under the magic influence of a spell, or was the whole world *en masquerade*? For this tall beauty with the pink and white complexion, the violet-gray eyes, shadowed under long lashes, and the dark chestnut hair falling in soft loose curls on her shoulders, was no more like the golden-haired enchantress of the ball-room than a stately lily is like a wild rosebud.

"Pardon me, Miss Ravenel," said he, "but—I believe I have had the pleasure of meeting your sister."

Miss Ravenel looked at him in surprise.

"My sister?" repeated she. "But I have no sister."

"Indeed? Then the other Miss Ravenel is no relation of yours?" he questioned, more bewildered than ever.

Gertrude Ravenel looked at Captain Despard as if for an explanation.

"What other Miss Ravenel?" said she. "I am the only person at Saratoga bearing the name."

Mr. Branchley smiled.

"I danced with Miss Ravenel night before last at the Grand Union ball-room," said he.

"My dear fellow, you are mistaken," said Captain Despard. "It must have been some confusion of names. There is only one Miss Ravenel at Saratoga, and she was in Lake George night before last."

"A clearly proven *alibi*!" said Mr. Branchley. But he went straight to Musard Falkland.

"Falkland," said he, "the mystery deepens."

"What mystery?" said Falkland, who was deep in the New York papers, which had just arrived by the morning train.

"I have just been introduced to Miss Ravenel, and she isn't Miss Ravenel at all, but quite a different person."

"Then there must be *two* Miss Ravenels," said Falkland, decidedly.

"She declares that there are not."

"Stop," said Falkland, who had been turning the matter over in his mind with contracted forehead. "We have blundered into some ridiculous misunderstanding. Did this mysterious fair one with the golden locks, who has disappeared like a shadow from our eyes, say that she was Miss Ravenel?"

Branchley pondered a moment.

"No," said he. "But she allowed me to infer it."

"Ah!" said Falkland. "That's quite a different matter."

"But what in the name of common sense does it all mean?" cried the Englishman.

"Simply a pretty girl's joke," said Falkland, laughing. "She has befooled us all to the top of our bent."

"And where is she now?"

Falkland shrugged his shoulders. "You might as well ask where the morning mists have floated to," said he. "The probabilities are that we shall none of us ever see her again."

Basil Branchley was silent, but in his heart he registered a vow that he *would* see the young beauty again. In all his life he had never looked upon a face that had enchanted him with such subtle, powerful influence. The liquid hazel eyes haunted him with their deep lights—the shy smiles came back to his

memory with even sweeter charms—and Basil Branchley was forced to confess to himself that he had actually fallen *in love* with a girl whom he had never seen but three times! A girl of whom he knew nothing, not even her name.

"I will find her out," he repeated, over and over again to himself. "I must find her out. And then the mystery will be fathomed."

For there was no concealing from his own consciousness the fact that life without the beautiful gypsy-faced unknown would be dreary and barren enough.

"A fool!" he repeated savagely to himself. "Of course I am a fool—but all that does not alter the hungry gnawing at my heart, the sick longing to look once more into those marvelous eyes."

And to his prejudiced vision, the fair faces of all the Saratoga beauties were "stale, flat, and unprofitable" studies.

"I *will* find her," he had said; but three days had elapsed and he was as far from the realization of his object as ever.

It was nine o'clock on the fourth morning—a bright summer day, with a deep-blue sky overhead, and the smell of new-mown hay in the air. The Hawthorn Spring was already surrounded by a perfumed and rustling crowd of ladies, eager to drink the morning tonic, which was popularly supposed to restore the roses which had been faded out by last night's waltzing. Gay greetings were exchanged, sweet laughter hung on the breeze—but in all the gay throng, Miss Ravenel stood silent and absorbed, apparently waiting for the little water-dipper to reach her in the regular rotation with which he dealt out his brimming tumblers, but in reality absorbed by her own thoughts.

"Gerty Ravenel," called out a clear, girlish voice, as a rosy-cheeked maiden in white muslin, with floating blue ribbons, came running toward her. "Oh, I am so glad to see you. I want to speak to you about the party in the Silver Spout this morning. Of course you'll go."

Miss Ravenel lifted her large violet-gray eyes to Flora Rivers' face, with a languid effort at interest.

"Is it nice there?" said she.

"Harry Despard says it's a perfect woodland grotto, with a rocky cave all ferns and wild roses, a cascade hidden among the trees, and the prettiest little spouting spring that you ever saw."

"It is a very warm morning," slowly observed Miss Ravenel, as if she were wearied even by the effort of thinking of the proposed expedition.

"Oh, but we shall drive. And it's not far. Dear Gerty, do go," coaxed Miss Rivers, caressingly flinging her arm around the other's waist.

"Who is to be of the party?" asked Gertrude Ravenel, languidly sipping the cool and sparkling water which had just been handed to her.

"Harry and Diana Despard—and the Collingwood girls, and Ray Montessor, and that party of southerners from Congress Hall—"

"All of them bores!" yawned Miss Ravenel.

"Oh, Gerty!" remonstrated her friend; "when Harry Despard is so mortally smitten by your *beaux yeux*! Oh, and I forgot—there is Mr. Falkland and his friend, the blue-eyed Englishman."

"Mr. Branchley?" The lovely violet eyes sparkled into sudden animation—the pallid cheek deepened into rosy bloom. "If *he* is to go, I may possibly reconsider my objections. He is one degree less intolerable than the others, and besides, he possesses the charm of novelty."

She spoke with a mocking laugh, as if she would fain conceal her too evident pleasure in the idea of going to the Silver Spout in Basil Branchley's society—and Miss Rivers had tact enough to abstain from making any remark upon her sudden change of opinion, although she could not repress an arch smile.

"You'll be ready then?" said she. "At eleven?"

"I will be ready," assented Miss Ravenel.

And Susan Soper had never found her young lady half so exacting in regard to her toilet as upon this particular morning. Twice the unlucky *femme de chambre* was compelled to put up the glossy masses of chestnut-brown hair, and take it all down again, before Miss Ravenel was satisfied with the effect, and nearly every dress in the well-filled wardrobe was brought out and critically inspected before the young belle decided finally on a pale-mauve grenadine decorated with knots of the softest lilac ribbon.

"Soper!" suddenly exclaimed Miss Ravenel, as she looked for the first time at the other compartment of the wardrobe, "you must have unpacked that Undine dress of mine very carelessly. See how crumpled it is."

Susan Soper turned very red.

"It must have been hanging under some of the heavier dresses, ma'am," said she.

"But it is your business to see that it is taken proper care

of," said Miss Ravenel, sharply. "Take it out and bring it here."

"Do you think you have time, ma'am?" asked Susan, all in a flutter. "It wants only a few minutes of eleven, and I see the Collingwood barouche coming down the street now."

Miss Ravenel started up, luckily diverted, for the present at least, from the subject of the fancy dress. "Give me my fan, Soper," said she, hurriedly, "and the little chip hat with the daisies and loops of white ribbon. Is the carriage there? Tell them I am coming."

And Susan Soper drew a long breath of relief as Miss Ravenel disappeared behind the plate-glass recesses of the elevator.

"If ever I'm caught in such a scrape again, I guess I'll know it," was her secret meditation. "I wish that feather-brained Dora Beck had been in Jericho before I let her wear that dress; it may lose me my place yet."

And she set herself busily to work to repair all possible and impossible damage, even more carefully than before, before her mistress should again observe the dress.

Miss Ravenel had been one of the reigning beauties at Saratoga that season. Rival cavaliers had striven for the guerdon of her smiles; a withered flower from her bouquet was treasured like virgin gold; her ball card was always filled, and her slightest whim studied by a court of loyal admirers. But she herself had never felt the sting of Cupid's dart until Mr. Branchley had entered on the scene with his blue English eyes, the soft languor of his voice, and the nameless charm of his manner.

"Do I love him?" she asked herself, one evening after they had promenaded, late in the golden moonlight, on the wide verandas, to the music of the band. "*Love* him? when he has never breathed a word or looked a look to show that he in any way distinguished me from the crowd of others who surround him. Oh, if I *do*, I must be fallen low indeed."

And the proud beauty had burst into tears, which seemed to gush upward from her very heart; such tears as she had never shed before.

And now, as she sat beside him, in Mrs. Collingwood's open barouche, with her face half hidden by the white lace parasol, she felt that it was happiness only to listen to his words, and feel the magnetic charm of his presence. Opposite to them were seated Blanche Collingwood, a handsome, somewhat *passée* young lady, who was beginning to be rather a by-word at Saratoga, as a baffled husband-hunter—and Musard Falkland, to whose energetic efforts it was chiefly owing, that the hand-

some young Englishman had been persuaded to join the party at all.

"Why should I go?" he had demanded impatiently when Falkland first broached the question. "What do I care for your Silver Spouts and your chattering young ladies?"

"Are you going to retire into a cave for the rest of your life?" good-humoredly retorted Falkland. "And all because the unknown enchantress resolutely keeps herself in the background? Because if you are, there is a very nice one close to the Silver Spout. A cave, I mean, not an enchantress."

"Nonsense!" said Branchley, without looking up from his book.

"Old fellow, look here," said Falkland. "You are making yourself ridiculous."

"How?"

"By moving around generally and striking attitudes, like Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. If you're going to become a recluse, do so, in Heaven's name; but as long as you're in the world, do behave as if you belonged to it."

Branchley meditated a moment or two, and then answered, sharply:

"I'll go this once, Falkland, to oblige you; but I will thank you to make no more engagements for me. I shall probably leave Saratoga in a week or so."

For Basil Branchley was beginning to despair of the dearest object of his life—the tracking out of the mysterious object of all his thoughts and fancies.

"Oh, Mr. Branchley," cried out Blanche Collingwood, affectedly, as they climbed in a sort of Indian file up the steep and narrow glen, where solemn pines and cedars whispered overhead, and drooping ferns hung over the silver thread of a tiny stream that went leaping down the moss-mantled stones, "isn't this a sweet place? Surely you never saw anything lovelier than this in your English glens."

At the top of the hill a rude cabin had been constructed close to the beautiful little sulphur spring which threw its showers of silver into the air, under a rustic summer-house—a Silver Spout itself. And here from behind an unpainted pine counter were dispensed questionable cigars, bottled soda, stale buns and lemonade to any visitors who might choose to patronize the establishment.

"You're not going to poison yourself with one of those cigars?" questioned Falkland, as Captain Despard advanced toward the "Refreshment Saloon," as it was ostentatiously labeled, while the ladies of the party were gathering ferns,

drinking the spring water, and wondering in what direction the mysterious cave was situated.

"Yes, I am," said Despard. "Jessup says there is a pretty girl behind the counter, if one can only get a glimpse at her."

He came back presently.

"I've ordered lemonade for the party," said he in a low tone to Miss Collingwood. "It's worth the money to see the little dove-eyed beauty who sells cigars, three for a quarter. She'll bring it presently; just wait till you see her."

"Is she really so pretty?" said the fair Blanche, rather superciliously.

"Never saw such a face in my life," said Captain Despard, enthusiastically; "and only to see her being ordered about by a fat woman with a wart on her nose, and a baby. Hush! Not a word. Here she comes now."

And Basil Branchley, glancing carelessly up from his task of endeavoring to mend Miss Collingwood's broken parasol, found himself to his infinite surprise looking into the deep hazel eyes and rosy conscious face of—Undine herself.

"Good heavens!" he cried, starting to his feet, the ivory fragments of the parasol falling to the ground.

But Dora Beck was not at all discomfited; she made him a low courtesy and held out the glass of lemonade.

"Please to take it," said she. "The rest are waiting, and Mrs. Meadows will scold me dreadfully if I don't hurry back for another tray full of glasses."

"Is this another masquerade?" said he, detaining her for an instant.

"I don't know what you mean," said Dora, dimpling all over.

"Before you go, you must tell me who you are."

"I am Theodora Beck."

"And what are you doing here?"

"How curious you are," said she, with a little shrug of the shoulders. "I am attending counter for Mrs. Meadows, to be sure."

And she passed on with the lemonade to Gertrude Ravenel, who sat just beyond on the trunk of a fallen tree.

But Miss Ravenel's woman's eye had taken note of Dora's radiant blushes and Basil Branchley's earnest gaze—and a vague consciousness that he never looked or spoke to *her* in that manner stung her to the heart.

"Do you know this young girl?" she asked him, almost

sharply, as she motioned away the lemonade and its pretty Hebe.

"I have met her once or twice," he answered.

"Oh," said Gertrude Ravenel, coldly, "I supposed you were old friends."

Mr. Branchley rose, with a look of serene content upon his face which Miss Revenel had never before seen there.

"Don't you think we have sat here long enough?" said he.

"Shall we walk down toward the carriages?"

And Gertrude took his offered arm, with downcast eyes and a heart as heavy as lead.

CHAPTER VIII.

"IT WOULD NEVER DO."

"AND now tell me all about it," said Mr. Branchley, earnestly.

"There is nothing to tell," said Dora Beck, indifferently, as she stood beside the Silver Spout, dipping her fingers coquettishly into the spray.

"Miss Beck?"

"Well."

"I suppose you will think I am flattering you if I tell you what an impression you have made upon me—how much I have thought and dreamed about you since that night when Undine carried away my heart in the tangles of her water-lilies and grasses?"

"It sounds very like flattery," said Dora, demurely.

She had watched Basil Branchley disappear through the interlacing boughs of the whispering old pines that morning with a pang at her heart; she had been so absent and heedless of her duties behind the counter, ever since, that Mrs. Meadows, the proprietress of the enterprising establishment, had scolded her until she cried, and when, at sunset, she had seen the tall figure reappear outlined darkly against the crimson west, and had jumped at once to the conclusion that he came to see *her*, it had seemed like a new dawn of hope and happiness. And she stood there now, as beautiful as a young goddess in her faded calico dress, her bright hair shining in the warm light, her cheeks tinted with the loveliest rose, listening to his words, and thanking Providence in her secret heart that Mrs. Meadows was putting the baby to bed in the back room of the tiny house, and that there were no customers for cigars or lemonade just then.

"But it is not flattery," said Mr. Branchley, growing more and more infatuated as he looked down upon this pretty flower-like young creature. "I am really interested in you. I want to hear what strange fate has brought you here, of all places in the world. Will you not confide, freely and openly, in me, as if I were a brother?"

Dora Beck looked up into his frank, kind eyes, and felt the frost-work of reserve melting in her heart. She was so solitary and alone, poor child; she had so yearned for some one to talk to.

"You won't betray me," said she, "to Joanna, I mean, and Reuben, and my grandfather?"

"Betray you? Nay, you surely can not think so ill of me as all that."

"But promise!" pleaded Dora.

"I swear it!"

"Then I will tell you," said Dora, and in her innocent, girlish way she related the whole story; the quarrel with Joanna and her grandfather; the stolen expedition to the Saratoga races, and its unexpected termination; the refuge to which she had been driven under the wing of Susan Soper.

"It all came of itself," confessed Dora. "One thing right after another; it didn't seem as if I had any will or power of my own at all. Do you think it was fate, Mr. Branchley?"

"Everything is fate," said Basil Branchley, gravely.

"So I found the pretty dress hanging up in Miss Ravenel's wardrobe, and I put it on, just for fun—and I had that dear, delightful evening, when I danced with you, and every one took me for a lady. Was it wrong?"

"It was a little injudicious," admitted the partial judge.

"I don't see how," said Dora, pouting her cherry lips. "But of course, when I heard that Susan's mistress was coming home, I knew I couldn't stay where I was; and the chamber-maid at the hotel, who was a very nice girl, was acquainted with Mrs. Meadows, and knew that she wanted a handy young girl to attend the counter and take the money, and I thought that anything was better than going back to Joanna. And I like it pretty well here, though it's lonesome at times," added Dora, with a sigh. "But, in the fall Mrs. Meadows is going to open a railway restaurant at Troy, and of course it will be a deal livelier there!"

"Livelier," repeated Mr. Branchley, blandly.

"More company, you know," explained Dora. "And higher wages."

Basil Branchley instinctively recoiled at the words. With

his old-established prejudices, aristocratic upbringing and fastidious fancies, the idea struck him like a blow. It was almost as if one had brought the divine Venus di Milo to serve behind a counter, or hung the purest of all Raphael's Madonnas in a gallery of gaudy colored prints.

"A railway restaurant," repeated he.

"Yes," said Dora, with conscious pride. "Quite on a large scale, you know."

"But you do not mean that—"

"I am to be shop-girl," said Dora, radiantly. "To attend the customers, you know, and keep the place tidy!"

"Dora," said Branchley, with an effort, "this is no place for you."

"Why not?" said Dora, innocently. "Mrs. Meadows is very kind, when she isn't in one of her cross turns, and—"

"It is no suitable place for a lady!" persisted Branchley.

"But I'm not a lady," said Dora, regretfully; "I'm only a working-girl. Oh, there comes a party up to see the Silver Spout, and there isn't a drop of soda-water off the ice. I must run for Mrs. Meadows, quick."

"No," said Basil Branchley to himself, as he walked down the wild ravine paths in the twilight, "it was a dream—a mere baseless dream—and I must rouse myself at once. It would never do."

And his thoughts went back to Branchley Manor, in the far-off English dales; to old Sir Reginald, with his white hair and straight features and perfectly shaped hands; to Lady Branchley, his mother, whose soft, gracious manners would have done credit to a princess; to all his friends and associations and connections, so widely separated from a girl like Dora Beck. And he repeated to himself, more definitely still:

"No, it would *never* do."

It was just a week afterward that Musard Falkland met his friend at the ticket-office of the New York depot. He had seen very little of him of late, but there had been a vague rumor circulated about the village, which he did not at all like—a rumor that Mr. Branchley went every day to visit the Silver Spout.

"Halloo, Basil!" said he, in the off-hand manner in which every man veils a deeper feeling, "so you are really here?"

"Where should I be?" said Mr. Branchley, examining his change before he deposited it in a Russia-leather pocket-book.

"Why," laughed Falkland, a little constrainedly, "we didn't any of us know whether you hadn't eloped with the pretty priestess of the Silver Spout."

Basil Branchley lifted his blue grave eyes, and looked Musard Falkland full in the face.

"What induces you to make such a remark as that?" said he, coldly.

"Don't be vexed, old fellow," said Falkland, dropping his tone of badinage, and laying his hand on the other's shoulder.

"But you know it really *had* an odd look—your romantic devotion and the girl's pretty face, and all that sort of thing. And if I were you I would just break it off at once."

"Would you?"

"Yes. It may come a little hard just at first," reasoned Falkland; "but you know it must be. A summer's flirtation is a summer's flirtation, and nothing more—and the heir of Branchley Manor has his own future to consider."

"Your advice is no doubt judicious and well timed," said Basil Branchley, quietly, "but unfortunately it comes too late. I was married to Miss Theodora Beck this morning!"

CHAPTER IX.

BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM.

"THERE he comes now!"

And Mrs. Basil Branchley, who had been perched in the broad window-ledge which overlooked the silver shining expanse of that loveliest of all sylvan sheets of water, Lake George, sprung lightly down, and ran to meet the advancing footsteps of her husband.

She was as radiantly lovely as ever, with her golden masses of hair put up in French coils and puffs, and fastened by a filigree silver comb, while her dress, a princess wrapper of rose-colored cashmere, was edged with silver braid, and secured at the slender waist by a heavy silver cord and tassels. Diamonds glistened on her fingers and shone like sparks of fire in her ears, and a large antique fan of pearl and satin swung by a fillet of white ribbon from her side. The transformation was complete: Cinderella was changed into the prince's bride—and yet there was an expression in the dimpled, child-like face which told that Dora Beck, even at the summit of all her hopes and aspirations, was not quite happy.

At least there had been, before that magic footfall had sounded in the carpeted corridor of the great hotel on the shores of Lake George. It was all sunshine now, as she flew into Basil Branchley's arms.

"Well, little one," said he, lightly, "so you are glad to see me?"

"Glad!" she echoed, pushing back the flossy, golden tendrils of hair that drooped over her fair low forehead. "Oh, Basil, I thought you were never coming!"

He smiled, evidently gratified by the open joyousness of the welcome accorded to him.

"Does the time then pass so heavily?" said he. "But you might have amused yourself by reading."

"I hate reading," said Dora, with a pout.

Mr. Branchley sat down on the low divan, and, drawing her gently close to him, took up an open volume which lay among the silken pillows, with a sprig of sweet verbena placed within it for a mark.

"Couldn't you interest yourself in 'Romeo and Juliet'?" he asked, caressingly.

"Horrid, stupid stuff!" said Dora, shrugging her pretty shoulders up nearly to a level with her ears. Branchley's face clouded over slightly.

"But everybody likes Shakespeare," said he.

"No, they don't," said Dora; "I don't!"

"And 'Romeo and Juliet' is the sweetest love story in the world."

"It's ridiculous trash!" said the bride. "Love, indeed! Who ever heard of people making love to each other in poetry? Why, I can't understand what half of it means, and the other half I don't care for."

"But, my darling," reasoned the young husband, "that is the very reason I want you to read Shakespeare and cultivate your taste a little. Don't you remember, last week, how you were obliged to confess to Mrs. Abelle that you never had heard of Shylock when they were all talking of the 'Merchant of Venice'?"

Dora gave her curls a saucy backward toss.

"Well, what then?" said she. "I dare say I know lots of things that Mrs. Abelle never heard of."

"Yes, but, Dora, I like my wife to comprehend what the rest of the world is talking about."

"We had no books at home," frankly confessed Dora, except 'Family Receipts' and 'Barnes's Commentaries.' And I never cared to read."

"But, to oblige me, dearest," urged the young husband, "will you not try to love this grand old author?"

"Do you mean Shakespeare?"

"Of course."

"No, I won't!" pronounced Dora, resolutely. "I hate Shakespeare!"

And, taking up the book, she threw it out upon the lawn, where it alighted in the center of a clump of glossy-leaved laurels.

"There," said she, looking up into her husband's face with a saucy smile that woke half a dozen charming dimples into existence, "I won't be teased about it any longer."

Mr. Branchley's brow darkened with momentary anger; he bit his lip to repress the quick words, and then he turned his face gravely away, releasing the ring-sparkling little hand which he had held.

But Dora was not to be repulsed thus. She climbed into his lap, like the child she was, and taking his face in her two hands, turned it around so that she could look up into his eyes.

"Are you vexed with me, Basil?" said she. "And all because I can't get interested in an old fudge who lived a thousand years ago?"

"Not vexed, Theodora, only grieved."

"Oh, dear!" said Dora. "Now you're going to be cross and grumpy. You're always grumpy when you say *The—o—do—ra* in that way. And I shall not stay with you any longer."

She caught up a delicate little muslin hat, all lace puffings and bows of pale-pink ribbon, and was turning away when there was a knock at the door.

"The laundress, ma'am, please, with the Swiss dresses and scarfs," announced the chamber-maid, and Dora, who was always intensely interested in the details of her toilet, turned back at once to inspect the contents of the heaping basket.

"Take them out, Louisa, and lay them on the bed," said she to the chamber-maid—our little Dora had learned to give orders right royally.

"My goodness me, Mrs. Hopper," to the laundress who stood courtesying by, "do you call these dresses done up?"

"I thought they were very nice, ma'am," stammered the woman.

"They are not, then," said Dora, angrily. "And you may just take them back, and iron them over again!"

"But, ma'am—"

"You hear me, don't you?" said Mrs. Branchley, imperiously.

"Yes, ma'am; but it's quite impossible to—"

"Don't tell me what's impossible and what isn't impossible," said Dora, lifting her clear treble voice above the laundress's monotonous accents. "I know as well as you do. I used to iron just such dresses as these, when I worked with

my sister, for the ladies of the Grand Union Hotel at Saratoga. If I did up one I did up a hundred—and I should have been ashamed, yes, positively *ashamed!*” with a stamp of her foot, “to send out such a specimen of work as that pink lawn with the Torchon lace frills.”

“*You, ma’am!*” said the laundress, staring, while the chamber-maid peeped over her shoulder with a face of eager curiosity.

“Yes, I,” said Mrs. Basil Branchley. “And I’ve many a time—”

“Theodora!” Mr. Branchley had risen and advanced into the midst of the fray, with a crimson spot on his cheek, “pay the woman and send her away.”

“I won’t!” said Dora, indignantly. “For such work as *that!*”

“Take your things and go,” said Mr. Branchley, imperiously, handing the woman a gold piece—and she obeyed without a word.

And Louisa, the chamber-maid, hurrying down-stairs, hastened to announce to a select circle of ladies’-maids and “upper” servants below, that it was quite true as the rich young Englisher had made a runaway match of it with a servant-girl, for she’d hear her say with her (Louisa’s) own ears as how she’d washed and ironed more’n a hundred dresses for the ladies at the Grand Union Hotel at Saratoga.

In the meantime, Mr. Branchley took his child-wife quietly by the hand and led her back to the sofa.

“Dora,” said he, “I think you are demented.”

She jerked her hand angrily away. “What’s the matter now?” said she. “What have I said?”

“Do you want all Lake George to know of your antecedents?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” flashed out Dora. “What is there to be ashamed of?”

“Nothing; but one doesn’t relate one’s whole life and adventures to every servant that comes along.”

“It’s every word of it true!” persisted Dora.

“Exactly; but it is also true that you are Mrs. Basil Branchley now, and that the old life is laid aside forever. Will you oblige me by referring to it as seldom as possible?”

“You’re *ashamed* of me!” cried Dora, springing up, with scarlet cheeks and eyes shining angrily.

“No, dearest, not ashamed; only anxious that you should learn to deport yourself properly in the new sphere to which you have attained.”

“You knew I was no fine lady when you married me,” persisted Dora, pushing him away as he fain would have drawn her toward him. “Why didn’t you choose Miss Ravenel? or that conceited Flora Rivers! I didn’t ask you to marry me!”

Mr. Branchley turned away in despair. “Dora,” said he, “these fits of temper are more like a child than a woman. If you will not try to conquer them—”

But she had dashed out of the room with an angry, inarticulate sobbing, before he could complete his sentence.

Poor Basil Branchley! He had been married scarcely a fortnight, and he had already been made to comprehend what a terrible mistake he had committed. He had wedded Theodora Beck in a moment of mad infatuation, and he was beginning to discover now that his fate had passed altogether out of his own hands; that he was tied for life to a vulgar, uneducated woman, with a temper which had never been curbed, and tastes as uncultivated as those of a South American Indian. It was true that the angel face was there with its deep, magnetic eyes, its halo of golden hair, and the complexion like the satin petals of a blush rose—but, alas! how little that face corresponded with the character he had hoped to find. And yet she was loving and affectionate, too, by fits and starts, and he fancied that he caught occasional glimpses of a nature which might reward a husband’s tenderest love.

As he sat there, asking himself in a sort of despair whether it were really true, and not a fantastic dream, that he, the fastidious and haughty scion of a proud old English family, had really *married* this wild and untamed creature of the woods, she came in, all breathless and rosy, her hat swinging from one hand, her eyes glittering.

“Oh, I’ve had such a race,” said she, “down to the lake, with little Benny Horton. I beat him, though, but I’ve torn my dress and lost one of the pendants off my bracelets! And now I must get dressed to go boating with Captain Raymond and his sister.”

Basil Branchley looked quickly up, with an objection on his lips, but he did not speak it. He shrunk from perpetual chidings and reproofs. Let her go this once; when she comprehended the rules and regulations of civilized life a little more, she would be wiser. And, after all, Captain Raymond was a pleasant fellow enough.

“Dora,” said he, “wait one moment.”

She stopped and looked rather rather apprehensively at him.

“Well,” said she, “what is it *now*?”

"Will you grant me one favor?"

"As many as you please, if you'll only stop scolding me."

"Then promise not to go out boating again with any gentleman without first consulting me."

Dora twisted her rosebud mouth into a comical grimace.

"Are you—jealous?" said she.

"Not jealous, dearest; only anxious to preserve my wife's name from idle and injurious comment."

Mrs. Branchley walked off, with a toss of her head.

"Dear me," said she, petulantly, "if I'd known what getting married meant, I should have thought twice before I took the fatal leap!"

"So should I," thought Basil Branchley, in the bitterness of his heart.

Dora attired herself in a gaudy and inappropriate dress of lilac silk, profusely trimmed with black lace—for no entreaties of her husband had sufficed to induce her to accept the services of a maid, and the fastidious young Englishman was too often obliged to submit to see his wife decked out in incongruous finery, like a second-rate actress—and hurried away. While Basil Branchley sat down by the window that commanded the view of the lake, and tried for the dozenth time since his marriage to write an account of it to his father, Sir Reginald Branchley.

But he could not. Twice he made the attempt—twice he tore the sheet of paper into fragments and scattered them to the winds.

"I can't do it," he muttered to himself with a long shuddering sigh. "Not just yet, at least. I will wait until she is a little more formed and cultivated. They can't help liking her when they see her; but to describe her would be to lose the cause at once; and in the meantime there is really no occasion to mention the subject at all; I know I have been a fool—but I do not want them to tell me so."

And he wrote his letter home without a word of allusion to the fact of his sudden marriage.

He walked languidly down to the office, deposited his letter in the post-box, and then, taking up a newspaper, strolled out into the delicious pine groves at the north of the hotel, to read or muse, as the humor should chance.

But he had hardly settled himself in a seat where the warm, balsamic air fanned his forehead like a touch of healing, and the blue sky glimmered indistinctly through the moving pine boughs overhead, when a clear high voice reached him, float-

ing across the water from a boat which was slowly being rowed shoreward—the voice of his young bride.

“Eight cents for that cigar, Captain Raymond!” she cried. “They charged you a deal too much—they swindled you. I know, because I used to sell them behind the counter at the Silver Spout refreshment house, four for a quarter.”

Basil Branchley started up from his seat as if some noxious insect had stung him.

“Good heavens!” he muttered between his set teeth. “A man of iron could not stand *this*!”

And when Mrs. Branchley came up to her room, full of the adventures of the boating expedition, she found her husband engaged in packing.

“Oh, Basil,” cried she, “what are you doing? Are you going away from here?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“To-morrow morning.”

“And the picnic to Fort Ticonderoga for Thursday, and the hop to-morrow night. Oh, Basil!” pleaded Dora, in angry bewilderment.

“You will oblige me by having your things packed at once,” said Mr. Branchley, with a tone of decision from which she knew that there was no appeal. “Perhaps you had better ring for Louisa, the chamber-maid, to assist you.”

“I won’t go!” said Dora, defiantly.

“Then you will remain here by yourself,” said Mr. Branchley, coldly.

And Dora sat down on the floor and burst out crying like a school-girl.

“Oh, I am so unhappy,” she whimpered, with her face buried in the sofa pillows. “And you are so c-c-cruel, Basil! Oh, I wish I had never got married!”

And from the very bottom of his heart, the young husband echoed her words.

“You’re never contented anywhere,” pouted Dora, as her first angry sobbings died away. “You wouldn’t let me stay at Saratoga, though I should so have liked to queen it over Miss Ravenel and let Susan Soper see my new wedding-ring and elegant dresses, all ordered from New York.”

“You don’t mean that you would have preferred to remain *there*!” said Mr. Branchley, in genuine astonishment.

“Yes, I should!” flashed out Dora. “But you dragged me away without ever asking for my opinion.”

"A curious taste, to say the least of it," observed Basil, dryly.

"And now," went on Dora, "just as I'm beginning to enjoy myself here and get a little acquainted, I'm to be carried off! I should like to know where we're going now."

"Traveling," was the curt answer.

"But where?"

"I have not quite decided yet. To the White Mountains first, I think; then down the St. Lawrence to Quebec and Montreal."

"But can't I stay until after the hop here?"

"No!" said Basil Branchley.

And Dora knew that he meant what he said.

CHAPTER X.

EAGLESLIFFE HALL.

"HAVE I got to live *here*?" said Mrs. Basil Branchley, with quivering lip, and eyes full of tears.

Eaglescliffe Hall was an old stone mansion, with curious hexagonal towers rising up from either side, all grown with ivy, and shrouded with the dark boughs of giant pines. It had stood empty for years; in fact, ever since the last of the Eagles had committed suicide in the lake, whose dark waters lapped the wall at the foot of the lawn. It had been a fine old mansion in its day, with great echoing rooms, halls with magnificent arched ceilings, and casements of stained glass. There was a library, a billiard-room, and a ruined conservatory; the carpets were soft as moss, in quaint, Oriental patterns, and the floor to the main entrance hall was patterned in diamonds of different colored stone, with the death struggles of the Laocœon petrified into marble, in its center, instead of smiling Dianas or lovely Ariadnes. For old Edward Eagle's taste was unlike that of the amateur in general. He had filled his empty conservatory shelves with a choice collection of rattlesnakes and serpents, preserved in glass jars of spirits; he had kept a hideous devil fish in an aquarium in the center of the library until the creature died—and his taste in statuary inclined to the horrible in all its shapes. He was a stealthy, self-contained old man, who had spent much of his time in an underground laboratory, experimenting on subtle poisons and unheard-of chemical combinations—a man who had neither friend nor relative in the world; and when he finally drowned himself in the black waters of Eagle Lake, it was popularly

supposed to be in a fit of despair, because he had exhausted the resources of his jars, crucibles and retorts.

For two years Eaglescliffe Hall had stood empty, in spite of the enticing advertisements inserted in all the newspapers by the resident executor, which represented it as "a superb residence, with elegantly laid out grounds and every modern improvement, with a fine view of Eagle Lake, and excellent fishing and shooting in the vicinity." But now, in the bleak month of March, when the snow-drifts lay piled up around the hexagon towers, and the lake was fast bound in fetters of glistening steel-blue ice, Eaglescliffe Hall had been rented, furnished, by a young couple, whose name was inscribed on the agent's books as Mr. and Mrs. Basil Branchley. Servants had been sent from Albany, with instructions to air and open the house, and see that it was put in thorough order for the reception of the new occupants, and a liveried groom had brought down a carriage, pony phaeton, and horses to match. And, really, when the great sunshiny windows were opened, and fires were roaring up the wide-throated chimneys, Eaglescliffe Hall assumed a very different, and more habitable aspect. The furniture, it was true, was very old-fashioned, but it was sumptuous and splendid in its way. The carpets were dim and faded, but they had every one of them been imported from Paris, and there was old brocade and Gobelin tapestry in the house, which would have sent a curiosity-collector half mad with joy. The pictures on the walls were rich and rare; the old china dragons that grinned from the carved mantels were historic gems, and there were bronze vases on tall pedestals in the hall, which bore the undoubted stamp of Benvenuto Cellini himself.

But our little Dora's tastes had not been educated up to this point. *She* would have preferred gaudy Wilton velvet, satin damask and bright new flower paintings on the walls; she hated solitary spots, and turned with a shudder from the views of pine glens, lonely hills and frozen lake, which aroused her husband's artistic rapture.

She was as beautiful as ever, in a black velvet dress trimmed with silver fox fur, a black ostrich plume trailing down over her golden curls, and a seal jacket buttoned around her slender figure—and Basil Branchley's eye rested upon her with fond admiration as he opened the heavy carved door which led into a great sunny room furnished in warm wine color, with a bay-window filled with azaleas, daphnes and hyacinths in bloom, an open cabinet piano, and a fire of pine logs blazing on the broad marble hearth. The curtains of wine-red silk

were looped away to let in the dazzling March sunshine—a low sofa was drawn up before the fire, just within the folds of an antique Japanese screen of sandal wood and illuminated satin.

“This is your boudoir, Dora,” said he. “I chose it myself. How do you like it?”

“I think it’s horrible,” said Dora, looking petulantly around her. “And a little dog too. I hate little dogs,” as a silky King Charles spaniel came bounding to meet the party.

Basil’s countenance fell. “I thought she would please you,” said he. “Here, Mab—little Mab!” and he stooped to caress the exquisite little animal.

“I never could bear dogs,” said Dora. “And flowers, too; dear me, how oppressive they make the atmosphere of the room. Don’t close to the door, Miss Maydew, please,” to a pale, rather subdued-looking young lady in deep mourning, who had followed them into the room. “It’s hot enough to roast one, with this great roaring fire and the sun pouring in.”

Mr. Branchley rang the bell.

“Here,” said he, to one of the servants who promptly responded to the summons, “take this dog down to the house-keeper’s room and tell her to keep it there. Mrs. Branchley does not like dogs.”

And he left the room.

“There,” said Dora, flinging her hat into the middle of the floor, and tearing apart the fastenings of the seal jacket with fingers that trembled with vexation, “he has gone away angry. Just because I don’t like nasty little barking brutes of dogs.”

Miss Maydew came up to her to assist her with the cloak.

“I do not think Mr. Branchley is angry,” said she.

“But I *know* he is,” cried Dora, petulantly. “Miss Maydew, don’t you ever get married. Married girls are wretched.”

“There is no danger,” said Miss Maydew, smiling sadly.

“No, not so much of course,” said unconscious Dora. “You’re not very pretty, you know, nor very young; but still people who are even less attractive than you *do* get married.”

Miss Maydew crimsoned and bit her lip. “Will you come into your own room?” said she, “and rest a little before dinner?”

“I suppose so,” unwillingly assented Mrs. Branchley. “Perhaps I’ll lie down a little if you will read to me out of a story book, so that I can go to sleep.”

“Shall I not finish that beautiful description out of ‘Paradise Lost’?”

“No!” cried Dora, imperiously. “I won’t have that

stupid heathen poetry crammed down my throat just because Basil orders it!"

Six months had elapsed since the impromptu marriage at Saratoga which had merged the lives of Basil Branchley and Theodora Beck; six months which have been mostly spent in traveling through the cities of the United States. Dora had asked her husband, impatiently enough, why he did not take her to England.

"Perhaps I shall—when the time arrives," he had answered, rather evasively.

"But *now*!" said Dora. "I should like to see the manor, and Sir Reginald, and my lady. And I am curious to know what they will think of *me*."

Basil Branchley instinctively recoiled from the idea.

"Some time," said he.

"But why not now?" urged Dora.

"It does not suit with my arrangements just at present," he answered, gently. "My little wife must have patience."

Dora had enjoyed the months of travel well enough, but she was restless and uneasy, like most women who are utterly without mental or intellectual resources, and could not be contented long in any one place. But when Basil announced his intention of settling permanently down on the shores of Eagle Lake, not far from Albany, she was overwhelmed with indignant amazement.

"A lonely house in the country," she cried, bursting into tears.

"It need not be lonely, Dora," reasoned her husband. "I shall be with you, and I have engaged Miss Edith Mayhew, from Albany, to be your companion."

"I don't want a companion!" cried out Dora. "I won't have one!"

"She is a very accomplished young lady," went on Mr. Branchley, "whose society will do you good. And perhaps, in the quiet and seclusion of a place like that you will acquire the literary taste that you lack, and pick up some of the accomplishments and womanly arts for which you have heretofore found so little time."

"Why don't you send me to boarding-school at once?" flashed Dora.

"I would, if I thought you would go," responded her husband, smiling.

"I shall hate Miss Maydew, I know," said Dora, bursting into tears.

But when she saw the gentle, pallid, dove-eyed girl who was

to share the solitudes of Eaglescliffe Hall with her, even capricious Dora could not but like her. Miss Maydew was entirely without relatives, and compelled to earn her living as a governess; and although she had at first hesitated to assume the situation as "companion to a young married lady of neglected education," the liberal salary offered had finally induced her to accept it, and when she saw what a wild, impulsive creature this Mrs. Basil Branchley was, she made up her mind that the task would not be so difficult, after all.

"She is nothing more than a beautiful child," Miss Maydew had thought.

But Miss Maydew had not comprehended how difficult it would be to control even a child, were that child indued with the passions of a woman, the ungoverned temper of a wild leopardess. And, during the long weeks at Eaglescliffe Hall, she began to realize that she was earning her salary by the hardest toil.

"But, Mrs. Branchley," argued Edith, one spring afternoon, when Dora was carelessly flinging sprays of lilac blossoms into the lake, "you haven't read a page of this 'History of England'!"

"No," answered Dora, indifferently, "I know it."

"And Mr. Branchley was so sure you would like it when he brought it from Albany a week ago."

"He ought to know that I detest those horrid prosy books," retorted Dora, sitting with her dimpled chin in her hands, and staring out over the blue, glittering plain of waves.

"You talk like a child!" cried Edith, despairingly.

"*I am* a child," laughed Dora. "I am not seventeen yet. How old are you, Miss Maydew?"

"I am eight-and-twenty," confessed Edith, after hesitating a moment or two.

"And you are very accomplished, and have read everything, and know how to play on the harp and the piano?"

"My education has been very elaborate," said Miss Maydew, with a sigh.

"But what good has it done you, after all?" saucily demanded the young wife. "Here you are a hopeless old maid, while I, stupid little goose that I am, have got a handsome husband. What do *I* want of big dictionaries, and poetry, and piano exercises? I tell you I *won't* be educated!"

"But perhaps your husband will love and admire you still more if you can sympathize with his intellectual self," argued Edith.

“That’s nonsense!” said Dora, carelessly. “There he is now—I must run and meet him!”

And she flew off down the avenue of pines like a magnified butterfly, while Edith Maydew watched her through a mist of gathering tears.

For Edith was alone in the world, and the contrast of Basil Branchley’s affectionate devotion and his young wife’s unquestioning faith in him was trying, at times, to the solitary governess who fought her daily battle with existence, and looked for no quarter from the world.

But, in spite of the taunts which Dora so liberally flung at Miss Maydew, she was not quite certain but that Basil Branchley would love her a little better if she were as accomplished as that young lady. Like most uncultivated creatures, Dora was acutely sensitive to the influences of jealousy, and it was only the night before that she had noticed that her husband and Miss Maydew had lingered long upon the lawn after she herself had taken refuge in the drawing-room.

“What have you been talking about?” she demanded, sharply, as her husband entered the low French casement at last. He looked at her with some surprise.

“Of you, dearest,” he answered her.

“I don’t believe it!” she cried, petulantly.

“But it is quite true, Dora. We were talking over some system of education which—”

“Education! education!” pettishly repeated the spoiled child. “I’m sick of the very word. And I wish you would send Miss Maydew away.”

“Send Miss Maydew away! My dear Dora, you have no idea of how much we should both miss her.”

“I shouldn’t,” said Dora. “*You* might, perhaps.”

Mr. Branchley turned away, and took up the newspaper with the expression which would sometimes come over his face, when her flippancy angered him more than usual, and which Dora called his “frozen look.”

She cast a glance of half-subdued triumph at Miss Maydew, however, on this particular afternoon, when she passed by leaning caressingly on Basil’s arm, which poor Edith, who knew nothing of the medley of emotions at work in the young wife’s heart, did not at all comprehend.

It was later in the day when Dora came down-stairs, dressed in white grenadine, with white roses in her hair. The sun was mirroring his last level light in Eagle Lake—the shrubbery on the lawn was bathed in crimson radiance, and, by the rosy brightness, she could see Edith Maydew seated in her plain

black dress on a rustic seat, under the old pine-tree, near the water, with Basil leaning earnestly over her. Both were talking in low, intent voices; both were quite unconscious of any other presence than their own.

The hot crimson rose to Dora's cheek. She closed her small white teeth firmly on her lower lip, and stood observing them for a second, and then she turned and went back into the house.

"I see it all," said Dora to herself. "Oh, fool! blind fool that I have been!"

She walked up and down the floor of old Edward Eagle's conservatory, now all blooming with tropical plants, vines and blood-red roses, with her hands clasped and her eyes fixed on the one little opening among the leaves without, through which she could observe the unconscious group upon the lawn. And when at last Mr. Branchley turned away, and walked slowly down the long pine avenue which led to the deep woods on the shores of the lake, she hesitated not a moment, but, flinging a light scarlet shawl over her dress, went out to the rustic seat where Edith Maydew still lingered, watching the broad ribbon of sunset quivering over the crystal surface of the lake.

"Miss Maydew," said she, in a low, peremptory voice, "you must leave this house."

Edith started up in surprise.

"Mrs. Branchley!" she cried.

"Yes, Mrs. Branchley," repeated Dora, in a taunting voice. "Although you and my husband seem to have forgotten that there is such a personage as Mrs. Branchley in existence. Leave this house, I say, and at once!"

Poor Edith shrunk from the glittering eyes and face of scarcely repressed anger.

"I won't have you making love to my husband under my very eyes and nose," went on Dora, growing momentarily more excited and less self-controlled. "No, I won't! Go, I say. Why don't you go? If you're waiting for your wages, there they are!"

And she flung her purse on the grass at Miss Maydew's feet.

"Mrs. Branchley," pleaded Edith, in an agony of shame and embarrassment, "won't you let me explain?"

"I'll let you explain nothing," cried Dora, impetuously. "I understand enough already—ay, and too much. "Will you go, or must I call the servants to put you off the grounds?"

Half an hour afterward, when Mr. Branchley came in to dinner, he looked with some surprise at Miss Maydew's empty

chair, for Edith was generally the most punctual member of the family.

"Where is Miss Maydew?" asked he.

"I'm sure I don't know," Dora answered, indifferently.

"Probably about half-way to Albany by this time."

"You don't mean that she has—gone?"

"Yes, I do!" calmly assented Dora.

"And for what reason?"

"Because I sent her away!" cried out Dora, passionately.

"That's the reason. Because I wouldn't have her any longer in the place—a simpering, hypocritical—"

"Theodora!" Branchley glanced warningly at the servant in waiting.

"I don't care," exclaimed Dora. "I won't be silenced like a naughty child! I *will* speak!"

"Bromer," said Mr. Branchley, quietly, "leave the room."

And reluctantly enough Mr. Bromer obeyed.

"Now, Theodora," said Basil, in a low, grave voice, "will you oblige me by telling me what all this means?"

"It means," cried Dora, half suffocated with rage, "that I have seen you making love to that woman long enough!"

"Hush!" said her husband, sternly. "Say what you please of me, but do not dare to speak an aspersing word of one so good and true as Miss Maydew!"

"Have you *not* been making love to to her?"

"Never!" Mr. Branchley answered.

"Has she not maneuvered in every possible way to attract your attention; to place herself in your way?" persisted Theodora.

"She has never thought of such a thing."

"You are in league together!" exclaimed Dora, wildly.

"Oh, I wish I dared to drown myself like old Edward Eagle! I wish—"

Her husband rose from his seat and came toward her, taking both her hands in his.

"Theodora," said he, "you are half mad with jealousy and evil temper. Since you can not comprehend the goodness and purity of a nature like Miss Maydew's, you certainly are incapable of understanding how entire and undivided is my love for you. But listen, Theodora. I have made my last endeavor to alter your nature from what it now is."

"If you didn't like me just as I am," sobbed Dora from behind her pocket-handkerchief, "why did you marry me?"

He clasped one hand over his eyes, with a low sigh that was almost a groan.

"It is a question which you have every right to ask me," he said, sadly. "God forgive me that I know not how to answer it. But for the future, we will let the past bury its past."

"And you won't try to *educate* me any more?" with a grimace at the obnoxious word.

"No," he answered, with a melancholy smile.

"Nor bore me with prim, precise, old maid companions?"

"No."

Dora's face brightened up again, as she stole her hand softly into Basil's.

"Then, Basil," whispered she, "you—you were not really flirting with Miss Maydew?"

"We were trying to devise a plan which would interest you a little more in the history of your own country," answered Mr. Branchley, coldly. "But rest in peace; I shall devise no more plans, good, bad, or indifferent."

Dora looked timidly up; she knew that she had been wrong, but she had not the moral courage and resolution to ask his pardon at once.

"Basil," was all that she found courage to say, "will you kiss me before you go?"

He stooped and pressed his lips to her forehead, but Dora felt instinctively that an impalpable something was gone from the caressing tenderness of his manner. And when the door had closed behind him she threw herself on the sofa and wept the bitterest tears which she had ever shed in her life.

For passionate, artful child though she was, she loved Basil Branchley dearly, and she shuddered to see the shadow of her own pride and temper rising darkly up between her and his love. But even as she shuddered she cried out persistently:

"I can't help it! I can't help it! He never should have married me if he can't love me as I am!"

CHAPTER XI.

SELLING FLOWERS.

THERE were periods in this phase of Basil Branchley's life, in which he was fain to ask himself, in perplexity of spirits, whether he had married a child or a woman. For Theodora was so sweet and winning at times, so exquisitely feminine, that the old infatuation revived itself and he felt that fame, future, and all were well lost for the sake of the beautiful young wild flower that he had gathered from the plains of

Saratoga. And then, almost in the twinkling of an eye, her moods would change, and she would be transformed into a petulant, passionate child, a vindictive young tigress, whose temper knew no curb nor limit.

Of the commonest elements of an ordinary English education Mrs. Basil Branchley was quite ignorant. She could read and write, it is true, and had somehow acquired, at the district school of her childhood, some vague idea of other things. But beyond this, she knew little, and cared less about the arts and sciences; nor could all her husband's efforts avail to induce her to cultivate the neglected garden of her intellect.

"Why should I read?" said she, "when I don't care whether Queen Mary cut Charles the Second's head off, or Oliver Cromwell put down the French Revolution? What are all the stupid old dead and buried people to me? Why should I practice on the piano and study French wits, when I'm not going to be a teacher or a governess? No, I won't. I'd a deal rather swing in the hammock under the Balm of Gilead-trees, and sleep!"

But these moods of Theodora's life were summer calm as compared with those in which the ungoverned passions of her tempestuous nature would rise up in absolute tornadoes. And jealousy, the green-eyed monster, was wildest of all.

She was looking through her husband's coat-pockets one day for a pocket-handkerchief whose exquisitely embroidered initials she had some vague design of copying, to fill up the time which hung so heavily on her hands, when a letter with the English postmark fell out—a letter directed to "Basil Branchley, Care Messrs. Oviatt & Vane, Albany, N. Y.," in a delicate penciled handwriting.

"It's from his mother," said Dora, aloud, as she held it up, scrutinizing it with an earnest glance. "Now I *do* wonder what she says of me."

For the capricious young bride had never believed her husband's avowal that he had not as yet ventured to disclose his sudden love-match to his English relations.

"Of course he has told them," Dora reasoned within herself. "And of course they're in a towering rage about it, and he don't care to tell me. But he'll have to after a little—or else I'll find it out for myself. Basil shall have no secret from me."

And so, with the utmost deliberation, Mrs. Basil Branchley sat down on a low velvet divan in the window, and opened the letter, quite oblivious of all those overstrained considerations of civilized life which render it almost an act of treachery to

glance at the contents of a letter intended for another's perusal.

As she did so a photograph dropped out—the photograph of a beautiful dark-eyed brunette, with coils of jetty hair wound around a small aristocratic head, features straight and regular, and a mouth whose short, curved upper lip gave an expression of hauteur to the whole face. The head was slightly inclined forward, the lips were apart, as if in a smile, and the large dark eyes seemed almost to flash upon Theodora's astonished gaze.

“*That* isn't his mother!” cried Mrs. Branchley, with reddened cheeks, and eyes full of passionate scintillations. “How dare he keep another woman's photograph in his pocket? But I'll be at the bottom of his secrets, or I'll know the reason why!”

And, opening the folds of the scented lavender paper, which bore a twisted cipher in lavender and gold at the head of the page, Theodora devoured its contents with tremulous intensity.

It was a gay, chatty letter, full of details of the far-away English home which Basil Branchley had not seen for so long, containing playful allusions to people and places which the young American wife had never heard mentioned, with here and there an expression which might almost be interpreted as affectionate, and it was signed, “Your ever faithful Augusta.”

Flinging the envelope on the floor, she caught up the photograph which had fallen unheeded in the folds of her dress, and rushed at once to her husband's study, where Mr. Branchley was yawning over the morning newspaper, which had just arrived in the Albany mail.

“Basil!” cried she, passionately, “who is *this*?”

He recoiled slightly from the suddenness with which the fair brunette's photograph was thrust between his face and the “Daily Argus.”

“Who is this?” he repeated, gravely, and not without some dawning shadow of anger in his deep-blue eyes.

“Yes, who is it? Tell me quickly, for I will know!”

“Tell me first where you got it!”

“Out of this letter. In your coat-pocket,” gasped Dora, with quick, eager accents. “Basil, who is ‘Augusta’? How dare she write thus to you—another woman's husband?”

“And you have been reading my private correspondence, unsanctioned by any permission of mine?”

“Of course I have!” flashed out Dora. “Why shouldn't I?”

He looked at her in utter despair, at the obliquity of her moral ideas.

"Theodora," said he, "give me that letter."

"I won't!" said Dora. "Not until you tell me who Augusta is."

"She is Lady Augusta Trente, my mother's dearest friend."

"How old is she?" catechised Dora.

"About twenty, I should think."

"Is she in love with you?"

"In love with me!" repeated Mr. Branchley. "My dear Theodora, what nonsense you are talking."

"Then why does she sign herself, 'Your ever faithful Augusta?'"

"Because we are old friends, I suppose."

"And why does she send you her picture?"

"For the same reason, most probably."

"Does she know you are married to me?"

"She does not."

"And what business has she writing to you?"

"My dear Dora, don't you think you have interrogated me sufficiently?" asked Basil, with a scarcely perceptible lifting of his brows.

"I *will* be answered!" cried Dora, imperiously.

He took her gently by the wrist and set her aside as she pressed against his chair.

"I think you are forgetting yourself," said he. "Give me my letter."

By way of answer, Theodora tore letter, photograph, and all, in a score of pieces, and flung them on the floor.

"There!" cried she, in a choked voice, "are you answered? Do you understand, now, what it is to anger *me*? Go back to your Augusta! Tell her that the American girl with whom you amused yourself for awhile has drowned herself in Eagle Lake, and stands no longer in your way!"

And, springing out of a low French casement, which opened on the lawn, she was gone.

But, in a second, as it were, Basil Branchley had overtaken her, and seized her in his strong grasp.

"Theodora!" cried he, "are you mad?"

"Yes, mad!" she answered, struggling to free herself.

"That is the very word! Maddened by my husband's infidelity—by his cruel treatment!"

"Will you listen to reason?" he said, almost angrily.

"Reason! A man's idea of *reason*!"

"You are laboring under a great misapprehension," said

he. "Lady Augusta Trente is an old friend of mine. We grew up together as boy and girl. She has always corresponded with me, and she knows of no reason now why the habit of a life-time should be discontinued. There is nothing whatever in her letters which my wife need be afraid to peruse."

"Has she been writing to you ever since we were married?"

"Of course; why should she not?"

"Because I will not permit it!" cried out the impetuous young wife. "Tell her you will receive no more of her small coaxing letters."

Branchley turned sadly away.

"Theodora," said he, "this jealousy is as degrading to me as it is unworthy of yourself."

"Then why do you keep our marriage a secret?" she cried out. "Why do you keep me in a solitary hole like this? Oh, Basil, there is only one road out of this troubled labyrinth. Take me to your English home, and present me there—as your wife!"

Mr. Branchley shrunk visibly from this idea, and Theodora perceived it.

"You are ashamed of me," she said, with rising color and eyes that glowed vividly.

"Not that, Theodora," said he, "but—"

"Ashamed of me, that is it," she repeated, stamping her little French boot on the lawn. "Oh, I wish you never had married me. I wish you had left me at the Silver Spout to be happy in my own way!"

And for a moment Basil Branchley almost wished that he had.

But the sparkling torrent of tears with which Theodora's passion resolved itself melted his susceptible nature at once.

"My own darling," said he, taking her caressingly in his arms, "do not talk in that wild way. You know that I love you. Where is the use of breaking your own heart and mine with words and looks like this?"

Her wild mood softened a little at the tenderness of his voice and words.

"And you are quite, *quite* sure that Lady Augusta—"

He interrupted her gently.

"My darling," said he, "if it will do you any good, I am ready to assure you that I never cared for Lady Augusta Trente, except as a brother might care for a sister."

"But, Basil, she loves *you*!"

"That's nonsense, Dora."

"No, it is not," said Dora, lifting her tear-wet face to his.

"I can see it in every line she writes. She loves you—and she means to make you love *her*. And oh, Basil, if—"

"Little one," said Mr. Branchley, with a smile, "we are making this affair altogether too important. Lady Augusta Trente is not worth all this discussion, and in the meanwhile we are losing this delicious cool morning. There is the boat moored under the willows. Get your hat, and I will take you for a row on the lake."

So the storm blew over; but after this Basil Branchley was more circumspect as to what he did with his correspondence, and there was, at times, a strange, wistful look in Dora's face when it was lifted to his that the young husband scarcely comprehended.

She did not understand him. She loved him, truly and deeply, in her wild gypsy way, but she felt that there was a sealed door within his heart, to which she had never yet obtained the key—and to Dora, whose motto was "All in all, or not at all," it was a strange sad mystery.

But she was gentle and less exacting in her ways for awhile—and just as Basil Branchley was beginning to congratulate himself that she was losing the stamp of her wild, fantastic girlhood, he was plunged again in the deepest depths of despair by an occurrence which too completely convinced him that Mrs. Basil Branchley was in nowise different from Dora Beck.

"Basil," said Dora one morning, "you are not going to Albany to-day?"

"Yes, I am. Why not?"

"It's the day of the county fair," said Dora, "and I want to go."

"My dear child, you had better not," said Basil, with an annoyed look.

"Why shouldn't I go?" said Dora, with wide-open eyes of surprise. "We always went to the county fairs, Joanna and I, when I lived at Saratoga. It was such fun."

"It is hardly the place for you," said Mr. Branchley, with half-concealed disgust at the idea.

"But I *want* to go," repeated Dora, as if this fact settled the whole question at once. "And I've got my new blue silk, just finished, and such a *sweet* little hat, with blue forget-me-nots and a pearl dagger fastening the loops of ribbon down."

"It is quite out of the question, Theodora," said Mr. Branchley, decidedly. "Even if I could be at home to escort you, I should disapprove of the crowd and bustle of such a

place. And as I am compelled to go to Albany on business—”

“Oh, that don’t matter,” said Dora, eagerly; “Paul Maverick and his sister are going, and I can go with *them*.”

Basil’s brow darkened. Mr. Paul Maverick was a dashing New Yorker, who had rented the place next to Eaglescliffe Hall for the summer months—one of those vulgar, ostentatious men who seem, as it were, to be veneered with an outer crust of society manners, while below they are of the very commonest grain—and his sister was a handsome, overdressed young widow, from whom Basil Branchley instinctively recoiled—a Mrs. Ledwich, whose grammar by no means matched her diamonds.

“Excuse me,” said Branchley, “I prefer that you should not.”

“But I told them I would go.”

“I shall send Bromer to tell them that you have changed your mind.”

“I will go!” said Dora, setting her small white teeth together.

“I do not think you will,” said her husband, calmly.

But all the day long, his business occupations were oddly checkered with the recollection of Dora’s set teeth and beautiful, defiant face, and although he did not seriously believe that she would actually disobey his wishes, he nevertheless rejoiced at finding himself able to leave Albany in an earlier train than he had expected.

“She will be lonely, poor child,” he thought, “and I will take her for a drive out toward Crescent Falls.”

But no Dora ran joyously out to welcome him when he reached the grim portals of Eaglescliffe Hall.

“Where is Mrs. Branchley?” he asked the servant to whom he flung the reins of the light dog-cart in which he had driven over from the station.

“I don’t know, sir,” the man answered with a curious twitch at the corner of his lips. “She left here, sir, at eleven o’clock, and she told Mrs. Hefferns, sir, as she shouldn’t be back to lunch.”

“Did she go in the carriage?”

“No, sir, on foot!”

“In what direction?”

“I didn’t see her go, sir,” said the man, “but Giles, the coachman, sir, *he* says she’s at the county fair.”

Branchley bit his lip.

“Nonsense!” thundered he.

"Selling flowers, sir, and dressed up in a regular masquerade fashion," added the man, striving to conceal a smile by passing his hand obsequiously over his mouth.

"Let go the horse's head!" shouted Mr. Branchley—a voice which the man never forgot—and driving the steed so swiftly as seriously to jeopardize the life and limb of the groom, he drove headlong out of the great stone gates again.

"If she *has* done this thing," muttered Basil Branchley to himself, "I will never forgive her!"

It was scarcely more than a two-miles' drive to the county fair grounds—a drive along a hot and sunny stretch of road, but Basil Branchley scarcely noticed the blinding clouds of dust in the oppressive heat of the sultry September afternoon; indeed, he scarcely paid sufficient attention to his driving to escape the wrath of the local police, as he dashed into the flower-garlanded entrance of the fair grounds.

There, close to the gates, was the open carriage of the Mavericks, drawn up in the center of a little crowd, with Mrs. Ledwich occupying it, in a toilet of pale-green moiré antique and black lace and a gaudy lace parasol held up between her eyes and the sun.

"Oh, Mr. Branchley," she said, with a little titter, "who thought of seeing *you*. We thought—"

"Where's my wife?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Just yonder," said Mrs. Ledwich, indicating with the carved point of her parasol a group a few rods away. "Paul is with her—you needn't be a bit afraid—and really the dear thing does it capitally. Such a splendid idea; one would think she was born to be an actress."

Mr. Branchley's spirited horse dashed among the crowd in a manner that scattered it to the right and left, and in little more than a second he had checked him close to a slight figure dressed like a country-girl, with a broad-brimmed straw hat, and a basket filled with tiny bouquets of hot-house blossoms.

"Flowers, sir? Flowers?" she cried out, in a sweet, saucy accent, holding up a spray of heliotrope and red carnation to him, while Mr. Paul Maverick's loud laugh followed on her words like an echo.

"Theodora!" exclaimed Basil Branchley, in a deep suppressed voice.

She threw back the hat, revealing a flushed lovely face, and eyes glittering half with mischief, half trepidation.

"Didn't I *tell* you I should be at the county fair?" said she. "And only see how much money I have got?"

She held up a little box of small coins as she spoke. Mr. Branchley sprung from the carriage.

“Get in!” said he, briefly.

“Am I to go home?” questioned she.

“Yes.”

“But I haven’t sold half my flowers,” remonstrated Dora, in a sort of mad bravado.

In another instant she found herself seated in the dog-cart beside her husband, the basket of flowers flung on one side of the carriage, the box of small coins on the other, while a general scramble among the children, itinerant traders, and beggars testified their delight at the arrangements.

Mr. Maverick stared blankly after the disappearing equipage.

“By Jove!” said he, “what a deuce of a temper the fellow has got!”

Mrs. Branchley glanced rather timidly up at her husband’s face, as they drove swiftly along.

“Basil,” said she, venturing at last to break the dead silence, “are you angry with me?”

“Angry!” he repeated, despairingly; “yes, and angry with myself!”

“But I’ve done no harm,” she declared.

“Do you think not?”

“It was only a frolic,” she persisted. “Mr. Maverick and Mrs. Ledwich, both said there was no possible harm in it.”

“Mr. Maverick and Mrs. Ledwich,” repeated Basil Branchley, in accents of infinite disgust. “They have certainly proved themselves excellent judges of good taste and delicacy. Look here, Theodora, if ever you disobey me again—”

“I am not a child, to be ordered!” burst out Theodora, indignantly.

“Listen!” thundered the husband; “if ever you forget again what is due to yourself and me, I will not promise to bridle my temper as I am doing now. All I have to say is—beware!”

And looking up into his flashing eyes and passion-clouded face, Theodora began dimly to comprehend that deep down in her husband’s heart there was a volcano of repressed emotion, whose full outburst even she, reckless and fearless as she was, could scarcely dare to brave.

But she took refuge in the oft-repeated and sullen platitude:

“I have done no harm.”

And what puzzled and grieved the young husband most of all, was that she actually seemed to be quite unconscious of

the sin against good taste and refinement of which she had been guilty in the flower-selling masquerade.

“And this is the woman I must present at Branchley Manor as—my wife!” Basil told himself with a cold chill at his heart.

Nor was it strange, under all these circumstances, that he still kept intact the secret of his marriage, and lingered on at Eaglescliffe Hall, dreading any change, yet aware all the time that this state of things could not endure forever.

“I have made my bed,” he told himself, doggedly, “and I must lie upon it.”

CHAPTER XII.

“YOU WILL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN.”

THE smooth-shaven lawn at Eaglescliffe looked very lovely in the slanting golden beams of the late October sun; the red leaves were showering down from beech and elm, at every breath of air, and the waters of Eagle Lake gleamed like a sheet of living sapphire. In the flower-borders standard roses were lifting their crimson and tea-colored turbans of bloom, and scarlet geraniums blazed like blotches of blood; the scent of ripening fruit in the grape-houses toward the south floated upon the senses, like a dream of some fair southern vineyard, and a stately nurse, in a white frilled apron and a Normandy cap was walking up and down the broad walk by the lake-side, wheeling a perambulator, in which, half hidden by coverings of rose-colored satin and Valenciennes lace, were enthroned two lovely twin children of a year old.

For pretty Dora, lying half asleep on a sofa in the south window, with a bowl on her lap and a Maltese kitten curled up on the skirt of her dress, was a mother now, child though she seemed—a mother, whose nature revealed itself in the wild, unreasoning tenderness and capricious changes of mood that one sees in a beautiful wild leopardess or a mother-robin. She would lie in the sunshine and caress her beautiful babes by the hour together, murmuring soft utterances of idolatrous affection; she could scarcely endure to have them out of her sight, and was resentfully jealous of Marie, the French nurse; she was restless and unhappy if they preferred their baby toys to the light of her eyes and the musical murmur of her lullabys.

“They are mine,” she would say, again and again; “they are *mine*, Marie has no right to their love!”

And she would sob her heart out, if ever her husband ventured to remonstrate with her on this jealous mood.

She was lying in the balmy sunshine on a brilliant blue and scarlet afghan, whose folds were thrown over the sofa, her golden hair floating loosely back, her slender braceleted arms thrown, sultana fashion, above her head, while the open book had slipped to the floor, and the slumberous shadows weighed down her white eyelids on the dark limpid eyes, when the door opened and Basil Branchley came hurriedly in with an open letter in his hand, and his face very pale.

She looked up pettishly.

“Why do you disturb me, Basil?” said she. “I had just fallen asleep, and—”

“Theodora,” said he, heedless of her words—indeed it is a question whether he had even heard them—“I have just received a telegram from England.”

“From England?” Dora sat up with deepening color, and a face of sudden interest. “Oh, Basil!”

“My father has been thrown from his horse in the hunting-field and badly hurt; in fact,” added Branchley, with a troubled face, “they tell me that it is not possible that he can live. I must go home at once.”

“Home,” repeated Dora. “Do you mean—”

“I mean to Branchley Manor, of course.”

“To Branchley Manor,” echoed Dora. “Oh, I am so glad! I shall see your English home at last!”

And springing to her feet to the great discomfiture of the Maltese kitten, she danced about the room, her golden hair falling about her like a glittering cloud, her cheeks flushed with the loveliest carmine.

“Theodora, you forget yourself,” said Basil, sternly. “Is this an occasion for childish folly?”

Dora stopped short.

“You are always scolding me,” said she. “But I forgot about your father being so ill; though, of course, old people must expect to die! And how soon must we be ready to start?”

“You are not going at all, Dora,” said Mr. Branchley, gravely. “My journey must be alone.”

“Alone!”

The young wife recoiled from his words, with an incredulous expression on her face.

“Yes, alone,” he repeated. “It is absolutely necessary to travel night and day. Not a second of time must be lost. Joanna is already packing up my things. The carriage will

be at the door in five minutes to convey me to the railway station. My dearest Dora, do not look so heart-broken; you must perceive the utter impossibility that you and the children could be hurried off at a moment's notice. And after all, remember that it is only for a short time that we shall be parted."

The light of ungoverned passion had sparkled into Dora's eyes—she repulsed the hand that would have taken hers.

"You are—*ashamed* of us!" she cried, almost in a shriek. "You will not take me to your English home!"

"Dora!"

But she had burst from the room in a white heat of rage. Mr. Branchley followed her at once to the apartment in which she had taken refuge like a hunted animal driven to bay. She was kneeling on the floor with her face hidden in the cushioned depths of a Turkish easy-chair, and her silken robes surrounding her like glistening billows.

"Theodora—my darling!" he whispered, stooping down to bring his face to a level with hers, and endeavoring to lift her up. But she spurned him away with a wild motion of the arm that was almost a blow.

"Theodora," he reiterated.

Still she did not speak or stir; but he could see, from the wild heavings of her chest, the storm that was convulsing her whole frame. He glanced with a perplexed air at his watch; the precious moments were ebbing fast away; the horses which waited to convey him to the station were pawing the graveled walk without, and he knew well that the New York express, like time and tide, waited for no man. It was quite impossible that he should lose this steamer; and yet how could he leave Dora thus?

"My dearest—my own wife," he urged, "remember that this must be the moment of our parting. Give me one good-bye kiss—bid me good-speed with one smile for me to remember until I see you again."

She started up, tragically beautiful in her tears and disheveled golden hair.

"You will never see me again," said she, in a low, thrilling voice.

"Dora, for God's sake, don't talk so!" he uttered, receding a pace or so.

"You are going to Lady Augusta," she cried. "Yes, you are," as he would fain have spoken. "Do you think I am blind and deaf? Do you think I am a baby to be deceived? I have amused you for a little while, but you are tired of me

now, and you are going back to your high-born English beauty. Be it so. But," she paused a second to catch her hysteric breath, with one hand pressed tightly over her heart, and the other lifted in the air; "you must choose between her and me, for you will never see *me* again!"

"Dora, my darling," he pleaded, "try to be reasonable; you must see that I am compelled to go alone. And as soon as matters are in any way decided, I will come, or send for you and the children."

She looked scornfully at him.

"What is the good of making promises like that which you never intend to keep?" said she, the contemptuous words stinging him to the quick.

"Theodora," said he, "for what, in Heaven's name, do you take me? Is it necessary for me to assure you, in so many words, that I am neither a villain nor a swindler?"

"Men are deceivers ever," she quoted, with a forced laugh. "Ah, you were right about that wearisome Shakespeare of yours; he *does* say things in bitter words that one can find for one's self. 'Men are deceivers ever.' And how should I expect you to be in any way different from the rest? But don't stay wasting your time here. Go to Lady Augusta Trente. I know very well that I am not worthy to wipe the dust off her feet. And I shall still have the children—our children."

Just then the servant knocked at the door.

"If you please, Mr. Branchley," said he, "Giles says you'll have a tight scrape of it to catch the four-o'clock train."

"Dora, my darling," pleaded the young husband, passionately, "will you not tell me good-bye? Will you not give me one last kiss?"

"I will never kiss you again," she utters, hoarsely.

He stepped forward and tried to take her in his arms. She pushed him away.

"You have made your choice," said she, "and now you must abide by it."

With an unutterable agony in his heart, Basil Branchley walked away.

"How can I leave her so?" he asked himself in the bewilderment of his contending emotions—and even after his foot was on the carriage step he turned back and hurried to the room where he had left his young wife.

The door was locked.

"Dora!" he called out, "Dora!"

But no answer was returned; and in five minutes the car-

riage was being borne swiftly along the smooth and level road between Eaglescliffe and the nearest railway station which would enable him to reach the Albany junction.

Poor Basil Branchley! He felt literally as if his heart were being torn in twain. He felt all a son's affectionate duty toward an honored and revered parent; he loved his young wife with the deepest earnestness of a man's heart. To leave Dora thus cut him to the heart, and yet there was no alternative. And, through it all, there was the bitter consciousness that it was to a great degree his own fault. He had sown this wind; he was now reaping the whirlwind.

"Would to Heaven," he declared over and over again, in the silence of his own soul, "that I had had the moral courage boldly to avow my American love match, with all its complications, at the very outset. My father would have been deeply angered, but he loves me, and I should have been forgiven; my friends would all have cried out with one voice, and it would have created a nine-days' scandal as such things always do. But the thing would have been done, and I should have breathed freer. I should not have been compelled to despise myself for my own cowardice, nor would this bitter cup of suffering have been held to my unwilling lips. But, blind fool that I was, I allowed myself to procrastinate and linger on—and now that it is neither the time nor the place for such revelations, I am driven to look my own folly in the face."

A noble nature is rarely as generous to its own deficiencies as to those of others—and in Basil Branchley's eyes, his conduct seemed simply unpardonable. And as he sat leaning back on the cushioned seat of the palace car, with his hat drawn down over his eyes, and his arms folded on his breast, Theodora's face of white unreasoning anger haunted him like a visible presence through all the lagging hours of that dreary night ride. While, in the weary and torturing dreams that overshadowed every attempt at slumber, her utterance sounded in his ears like the solemn echo of a prophecy:

"You will never see me again."

And yet he never once thought of the possibility of those mad words being fulfilled. He pondered over her with a sad and pitying tenderness, as a loving parent pities the little child who beats the air in a burst of futile passion; his aching heart pictured her, as she sat with her infants, alone and desolate, until the moisture stood on his eyelashes, strong man though he was.

"Poor little Dora, poor undisciplined child," he thought,

“God comfort her! God keep her until I can claim her in the eyes of earth and Heaven as my own.”

And then there was the flashing of many lights in his eyes, and the reverberating echo of the arched walls of the monster railway terminus, and Basil Branchley roused himself as if from a dream.

“Are we in New York already?” said he.

CHAPTER XIII.

DORA'S REVENGE.

FOR a few moments after Basil Branchley's receding footfalls had died away upon the carpeted corridor, Dora stood quite silent, in the middle of the room, her face pallid with passion, her eyes shining like vivid stars. And then she heard the grating of carriage-wheels over the gravel, and knew that he was gone.

Up to this moment she had entertained a vague idea that, at the very last, he would relent and yield to her wish to accompany him; but now she knew how vain had been all such fancies, and the tide of anger swelled higher than ever in her heart.

“I will never forgive him for this!” she uttered, aloud.
“No, *never!*”

Mechanically she went to the window. There, under the swinging green pennons of the gigantic willows by the water-side, Marie, the Normandy nurse, was walking up and down, pushing the perambulator before her, and singing some monotonous little canzonet of her own country in the red glow of the sunset. Theodora's face lighted up as her eyes fell on the children.

“They, at least, are mine!” thought she. “And I will strike ruthlessly at him through them!”

For Dora regarded neither law nor justice in the fevered height of her ungovernable temper. She only felt that she had been wronged and ill-treated; she only knew that she must be revenged; and in this moment of delirious passion, all the love which she had felt for her young husband seemed turned to hatred.

She rang the bell furiously. Bromer, the footman, answered it, with a speed commensurate to the imperious haste of the summons.

“Send Mrs. Hefferns here at once,” said Mrs. Branchley.

The man looked curiously at her. “She's in one of her hopping tantrums, sure enough,” thought he; but he answered,

subserviently, "Yes, madame," and hastened away. Mrs. Hefferns came, a white-haired, portly old English woman, who had been highly recommended from Albany to her present position.

"Mrs. Hefferns," said Dora, "I want you to pay all the servants and discharge them."

"Discharge them, ma'am?" repeated the old woman, in amazement.

"I thought I spoke plainly enough," said Dora. "Yes, *discharge* them. And then close up the house and send the keys to the agent's, at Ballston."

"But, ma'am—"

"There's no difficulty about the money," said Dora, taking a purse from the drawer of an inlaid rosewood cabinet which stood between the windows. "I dare say you will find plenty there—the bills were only settled last week."

"It's not about the money, ma'am," said Mrs. Hefferns. "But of course, the servants will all expect a month's wages in the place of the month's warning."

"Give it to them, then."

"Yes, ma'am—of course. But my master bade me to tell you—"

"I want no last messages from your master!" broke in Dora, with a scarlet spot on either cheek.

"It's only about business, ma'am," persisted Mrs. Hefferns, "and please, if you'll allow me to mention it, it'll be off my mind—he bade me tell you that you are to draw on Mr. Oviatt, the Albany law-gentleman, for what money you needed while he was gone."

"He need not trouble himself," said Dora, haughtily. "I have all the money I need; and if I were starving, I would not touch his charity."

Mrs. Hefferns stared.

"Do you hear me?" said Dora, with a stamp of her foot. "Do as I bid you; but first send Marie to me."

Mrs. Hefferns obeyed, not daring to remonstrate further.

"It's my belief, Mamselle Marie," said she, after delivering her message to the nurse, "as my young lady is going mad with pride and temper. And whatever induced my master to marry her I can't tell, in spite of her pretty face."

Marie shrugged her shoulders, and leaving the children in charge of an under-nurse, who presided over the nursery in her occasional absences, hurried to attend Mrs. Branchley.

"Marie," said Dora, "I want you to pack up the children's clothes. I am going on a journey with them."

"Yes, madame," assented the French woman. "At what time am I to be ready?"

"You are not to be ready at all," said Dora. "You are not going."

"But, madame, I do not think Eunice—"

"Eunice is not going either."

Marie opened her dark eyes.

"But, madame—"

"Am I to be obeyed, or am I not?" said Dora, angrily.

"One would think you were all fools and idiots. Once for all, leave off questioning me, and do as I bid you!"

"Madame, am I to remain here?" persisted Marie, who did not fancy the idea of Englescliffe Hall deserted.

"You are to be discharged," said Dora, curtly. "Do you hear? I have no further need for your services."

Marie burst into tears. In her passive, undemonstrative way she was really fond of her little charges, and this sudden dismissal startled her like an unpleasant shock.

"Don't bore me with a scene," said Dora, whose heart was apparently like adamant. "You tire me to death, all of you, and there is no time to spare. I want the children to be ready for the seven-o'clock train to-morrow morning."

The house was in an unwonted bustle that night; lights glancing in all its corridors, servants hurrying to and fro to prepare for the closing of the establishment and their own abrupt departure. But long after the confusion had quieted down and all the weary servitors were in their beds, Dora was walking up and down the broad path on the shores of the lake, her white dress gleaming spectrally under the willow boughs, her large eyes shining fitfully in the starlight.

She could not rest; and a wild, restless motion was all the relief which she could obtain.

It was long past midnight when Marie, the nurse, started from her sleep, to see a slender white figure bending over the cribs in which the infant children lay.

"Holy Mary!" she ejaculated, feeling instinctively for her rosary beads, "it is a ghost!"

"No, Marie, it is not a ghost," said Dora, impatiently, "it is only me. I—I wanted to look at the children before I went to sleep."

"They are resting quietly, madame," said Marie, in great surprise.

Side by side the trim rosewood cribs stood, veiled in a cloud of white embroidered lace, looped back with blue ribbons. The pillows were covered with the sheerest India muslin, edged

with delicate lace—the coverlids were of pale-blue satin and swan's-down; and the little sleepers, as they lay there, were models of infantine grace and beauty. Walter, the boy, was a trifle the larger of the two, with his father's dark, curly hair, regular features, and long eyelashes, and Helen, the girl, had inherited the golden tresses, radiant complexion, and large dark eyes of her young mother. Walter lay quite still, like a beautiful marble statue of Sleep, breathing softly, and with regular respirations; but little Helen tossed her tiny arms and laughed and murmured in her sleep.

For a moment or two, Theodora stood looking down on them with convulsed features, and a heart that throbbed passionately.

“He does not love me,” she thought, exultantly, “but his whole heart is bound up in *them*. And through my children and his I shall be well revenged.”

Before nine o'clock the next morning Eaglescliffe Hall was shut up once again, the servants were scattered far and wide, and the key of the old house was delivered to the astonished agent, who occupied a moldy brick house near the village of Ballston. The old gardener who lived in the basement, like a superannuated mole, had stared at the departing carriage, and called something after it, which was lost in the rattling of the wheels.

“What does he say?” asked Dora, impatiently. “Stop, Giles—he is running after us.”

The old man came up, breathless and panting, as the horses were momentarily checked.

“My lady,” said he, taking off his hat, so that the keen autumn wind blew the gray locks to and fro, “you left no directions about the letters.”

“What letters?” said Dora, sharply.

“Any letters that may come for you.”

“I expect none!”

“Yes, but my lady—”

Dora tore a leaf out of her pocket memorandum-book; a gilded toy with pearl backs and scented leaves, and wrote the words: “Mrs. Bates, Saratoga Springs, N. Y.”

“There,” said she, “I have told you that I expect no letters; but if any come, you may send them to that address. They will reach me.”

And so the carriage whirled through the great stone gateposts of Eaglescliffe Hall, and Theodora's heart beat exultantly at the conviction that she was leaving the past behind her. And as she looked back at the gray towers of the old house,

with the two children lying in her lap, she murmured half aloud.

“ I will hold to *his* lips the same cup of heart-sickness that he has made me drink!”

It was late in the afternoon when a jolting old depot hack stopped at the dreary old house on the country road, where the half-dead Lombardy poplars yet lifted their tapering heads, and the dust-laden lilac bushes clustered around the kitchen door-stone.

Joanna Beck had been hard at work all day. It was true that the Saratoga season was over, but Joanna had been lucky enough to secure the custom of a crotchety fine lady who had been ordered by her physician to remain at the Springs until November for the benefit of the healing waters; and Joanna had just laid the last snowy drift of collars and cuffs, lace-bordered handkerchiefs and delicately fluted fichus into a huge wicker basket, and was hanging over the kettle, preparatory to her evening cup of tea.

“ It’s a lonely life,” said Joanna to herself, as she set out the one cup and saucer, the half loaf of bread and the hunch of cheese on a little round table, and put a fresh stick of wood into the stove to make the fire burn brighter.

For the old cushioned rocker by the fire was vacant now; it was a year and more since they had laid old Grandfather Beck to rest in the neglected little country church-yard, where all his forefathers had been buried since the days of the Pilgrims. Nor had the farm-house “ keeping-room ” grown fresher or more cheerful since the days when pretty Dora used to rebel so frantically against its grim formality and utter lack of ornament. The faded strips of rag carpet which barely covered the boards of the floor were more faded still—the gaudy prints on the wall set Nature more at defiance than before; the ceilings were lower and more smoke-burned than ever, and the calico window curtains were faded in streaks where the sunshine had struck them. Whistle, the blackbird, was dead, but his empty cage still hung forlornly beside the casement, and the stunted geraniums which it had once been Dora’s delight to tend and water, had been flung out into the dust heap long ago. For Miss Joanna Beck never had been a believer in the ornamental, and she had seen no reason of late to alter the tenets of her life.

She was standing before the fire with one foot on the stove hearth, and her eyes fixed mechanically on the leaping flame which was visible through a crack on the cast-iron lid, when

the sound of some vehicle, stopping at the door, startled her from her reverie.

"It's Reuben Hallowell's man after them clothes, a full half hour before his time!" said Miss Joanna, fretfully, as she hastened to light a tallow candle and open the door.

But to her amazement, it was not the one-horse lumber wagon in which Reuben Hallowell's man usually conveyed the baskets of newly laundered linen to the Springs, but a close carriage from the depot, with a trunk behind, which the hackman was unstrapping as rapidly as possible.

"Hackman!" screamed Miss Beck, "hold on! It ain't for here! There's some mistake, hackman."

But the next moment a lady in a Rubens hat of dark-blue velvet, with a drooping plume, a dark-blue silk dress which trailed at least half a yard on the dusty grass behind her, and a glittering Oriental shawl hanging in folds over her shoulders, came up the narrow path, with two sleeping children in her arms—children whose sumptuous dress and strange, startling beauty struck Joanna Beck with the odd sensation that she must be in a dream.

"Open the door, Joanna!" said a well-known voice in a low, peremptory accent. "And take one of the children, quick; I have held them until my arms ache."

Mechanically Miss Joanna obeyed; and as she did so, the blue satin hat fell backward from the child's face—it opened large wondering eyes of surprise, crying, "Marie! Marie!"

"Theodora!" cried Joanna, "what in the name of goodness does all this mean?"

And Dora, sitting down in the low chair before the fire, with the folds of her lustrous silk dress falling softly around her, and her golden hair shining faintly in the dusk, answered:

"Give me the baby, Joanna, and warm some milk for them as quickly as you can. It means that I have come to make you a visit."

CHAPTER XIV.

BRANCHLEY MANOR.

OF all the stately ancestral homes of old England, none could present a fairer aspect in the level sunbeams of the early November sunset than Branchley Manor, situated in one of the most fertile vales of southern England, where the winding Usk River embroiders the Monmouthshire slopes like a broad blue ribbon. The mansion itself was of cream-colored stone,

half covered with creeping masses of ivy in black-green sheets, and climbing vines, while the deep porches with columns and overhanging finials of stone were all embowered in foliage. The brilliant casements were of deeply colored stained glass, and bore the stamp of great antiquity, both in tinting and design—in fact, it was said that Branchley Manor House had originally been a Benedictine monastery, founded in the reign of William Rufus, and the ancient chapel at the north end, with its antique stone roof, its huge oriel windows, and high-backed seats of black carved wood, bore out the truth of the rumor. The hall, a wide and superb entrance, with a stone floor, half hidden by strips of Turkey carpet, extended from the blossoming flower-garden at one side to the green lawns at the other, which sloped down in a succession of gentle terraces to the silver tides of the Usk—a hall with paneled ceilings, painted in gorgeous glimpses of Italian landscapes, and side walls hung with folds of deep crimson tapestry, which formed a rich relief to the life-sized marble statues which had been placed there, from time to time, by the art-loving members of the family of Branchley. The antique solemnity of this old stone hall, once trodden by the bare feet of grim Benedictine monks, was oddly contrasted on the south side by the airy brightness and beauty of Lady Branchley's drawing-room, a superb apartment, all paneled in white and gold, with yellow satin hangings, a ceiling radiant with frescoed flowers and fruit, and furniture bearing the imprint of the London manufacturer. From this apartment opened a boudoir, a morning-room and a conservatory, all connecting by arched door-ways, garlanded in painted flowers and buds on a groundwork of white enamel, and draperies of pale-gold satin, brocaded with white shells. For Lady Branchley had been a famous London beauty, and her wealth had helped to restore the ruined magnificence of the manor house, while her taste had remodeled and renovated many of the ancient rooms. And although the architects and antiquaries shook their heads, and talked about the "unities" and the "fitness of things," Sir Reginald could not find it in his heart to deny the slightest whim to the beautiful young bride whose blue eyes lighted up the old place like a new lease of youth and sunshine.

At the left of the hall Sir Reginald's own apartments preserved the character of the old house in their carved oak wainscoting, their floors of dark polished wood and the low ceilings whose massive beams seemed almost to touch the visitor's head. The library was a great echoing apartment whose mullioned windows cast oblique reflections of gold and azure

and blood-red on the floor; and from this opened the gray old chapel whose altars and chancel rail were carved in rare designs, brought from Venice, and whose walls were hung with tapestry of which the pattern had long since faded into a dull, indistinguishable brown.

This was Branchley Manor House, and in an upper apartment, whose closely veiled windows opened toward the silver Usk, now all irradiated with the crimson radiance of a stormy November sunset, the dead body of Sir Reginald Branchley had lain scarcely a week ago.

He had died a death of startling suddenness. A devoted adherent to the good old custom of fox-hunting, he had gone forth in the morning, overflowing with spirits, and calling back gay messages to his wife, and had been brought home in the night with his spine fatally injured by a fall from his horse. And before the alarmed family fairly realized that he was dangerously hurt, the physician came softly down into the room where Lady Branchley sat with clasped hands and pallid face, with a tall, slight girl at her side—a dark-eyed young beauty, with purple-black hair growing low upon her forehead, and full scarlet lips, like an Italian Fornarina.

Lady Branchley started to her feet. “Oh, doctor!” she cried, “is he better?”

“Better?” The physician looked into her face with eyes of strange pity. “My Lady Branchley,” he said, gently, “he is better. He has passed into the world where there is no more pain nor sadness. After life’s fitful fever, he sleeps well.”

And Lady Branchley had fainted in Lady Augusta Trente’s arms.

Alas, how sadly and slowly those first days of the terrible bereavement had dragged themselves away—the red sunrises that called people to a new remembrance of their bereavement; the gray dusks that seemed to wrap all the world in mourning. And then had followed the stately funeral, with its solemn regalia of woe, and then the blank hush which is so sure to follow on the strained excitement of a scene like this.

For nothing more could be done until the arrival of Sir Basil Branchley, the heir.

The doors and windows were all wide opened on the lawn, this bland November afternoon, for the air was soft and balmy as May, the yellow sunshine lay like a mist of gold over the late garden blossoms, and the dead leaves which were drifting, drifting down everywhere, a rain of amber and crimson, brought with them no sense of sadness or decay. Julian

Branchley, the younger son of the deceased baronet, sat writing in his father's study—writing the formal mechanical letters to distant kinsmen and connections which are generally written on such occasions as this. He was singularly unlike his brother—tall and dark, with a narrow chest, slightly stooping shoulders, a face like a swarthy Italian, and large near-sighted eyes, which were generally seen only through eye-glasses. It was not a pleasant face, and yet one would be puzzled to tell what or where was the repulsive feature. Nor was Julian Branchley's voice one which would inspire trust or confidence. It was low and soft, and exquisitely modulated, but somehow, throughout all, one caught the ring of insincerity. And it was a fact worthy of notice that, although Julian Branchley had no enemies, neither had he any warm friends. As boys, he and his brother Basil had quarreled vehemently. The frank, straightforward nature of the elder had rebelled utterly against the subtle ways and overt treachery of the younger; and although, as they grew to manhood, an external peace was preserved, there was an entire lack of the warm fraternal sympathy which alone can carry out the true idea of brotherhood.

“I dare say Julian's no end of a good fellow,” Basil remarked, indifferently, “but I never could understand him.”

“Basil means well, I have no doubt,” Julian would say, “but he has no idea whatever of diplomacy.”

While Lady Branchley, sitting in the great, half-darkened drawing-room, tried to lose the recollection of her sorrows in the comforting pages of some devotional volume, lent by the neighboring vicar—without the least success, however; and Lady Augusta Trente glided to and fro, now arranging tea-roses in the cut-glass vases on the table, now pausing to look out where the sunshine slept in broad bands of gold on the close-shaven turf of the lawn, or reflected itself back in glimpses of sparkling sapphires from the Usk River.

“Augusta, come here,” said Lady Branchley, laying down her book, and holding out a slim white hand, all the whiter from its contrast with the jet bracelet on her wrist, and the deep crape bands of her hanging sleeve. She had been a famous beauty once; she was a handsome woman still, with a face like her son Basil's, bright brown tresses threaded with silver, a skin that was still like pink and white velvet, and a soft, wistful mouth.

Lady Augusta Trente glided to her side, and knelt down on a low embroidered cushion at her feet, with her elbows resting

on Lady Branchley's lap, and her large Oriental eyes lifted to the widow's face.

"Dear Augusta," said the elder lady, as she softly stroked down the jet-black braids of hair that were coiled around Lady Augusta's small, shapely head, "you should have been my daughter. Heaven knows I need one, at such a time as this."

The quick tide of crimson mounted to Lady Augusta Trente's very temples—she hid her face on Lady Branchley's arm, only murmuring:

"Dear Lady Branchley!"

"And perhaps you will be my daughter still," resumed the widow. "For Basil always liked you—"

"No, no, dear Lady Branchley."

"Yes, always," persisted Lady Branchley. "And now that he will see how beautiful you have grown—how necessary you are to my happiness, and that of every one—he will surely learn to look upon you as his guardian angel."

Lady Augusta was silent, with her fair, imperial young head still bowed; but in her secret heart there was a tumult of contending emotion: pride and happiness, and buoyant hope; for ever since the days in which she had come, a slim, dark-browed young school-girl, to spend her vacations with Lady Branchley, her dead mother's earliest friend, it had been the dearest aspiration of her heart, one day to be lady of all these broad domains, and wife of the young heir of Branchley.

The Earl of Fauntleroy, her father, had died penniless, at the German gambling haunt where he had squandered away all his money; his wife had died when her youngest girl was an infant, and had it not been for the good-nature of a distant cousin, who had adopted the two children in some degree and provided for them, this young scion of an aristocratic race would have been reduced to absolute want. But the distant cousin was quite content that Lady Branchley should have all of the young Lady Augusta's society that she pleased, and so it came to pass that Lady Augusta was really more at home at the Branchley Manor House than in her own abode, or rather the rich cousin's abode of The Chestnuts, near Monmouth.

Lady Augusta had known what it was to be pinched and scantled for money, to wear turned dresses and shabby gloves, and to look longingly upon the rich jewels and trinkets showered on her more fortunate schoolmates, and even if love had nothing to do with the question, she meant to "marry rich," and secure all these coveted luxuries. And she had also made up her mind to marry Basil Branchley.

"I wonder if he could possibly arrive in time for dinner," said Lady Branchley, musingly.

Lady Augusta looked up.

"Do you mean—"

"I mean Basil, of course," said the elder lady. "He has been away from us two years now. And he is my eldest boy. Go, dear Augusta, and look down the drive."

"Like Sister Anne in the story," said Lady Augusta, half laughing.

"Yes, like Sister Anne, if you will have it so," returned Lady Branchley, with something as near a smile as had crossed her wan lips since they brought her dying husband's stricken form across the threshold. "Oh, my darling, you don't know how my heart hungers and thirsts for a sight of him."

Lady Augusta Trente thought that she *did* know; but she made no comment, and, throwing a light Shetland shawl over her shoulders, she went out into the westering sunshine, down the avenue of beeches whose coppery leaves were falling noiselessly in the golden stillness of the autumn air. As she stood a moment with her hand shading her eyes from the intense brightness of the sun, a tall figure leaped the hedge of laurels at the left, and stood before her.

"Augusta!" said Basil Branchley, huskily, and not without an accent of disappointment in the tones. "I thought it was my mother."

"Ah, Basil, is it you?" And, forgetting all else in the overwhelming joy of the moment, Lady Augusta Trente ran into his arms, and held up her beautiful scarlet lips for the kiss which the school-girl and college lad had so often innocently interchanged.

But he did not kiss her; he put her gently away, and pressed the hand she held out, with a kind cordiality which warded off all thought of offense.

"How is she?" said he, eagerly.

Lady Augusta put her arm through his, and tripped along the avenue at his side, her eyes still fixed with radiant happiness on his face.

"She is better, Basil. Of course you got our telegram in London?"

"Of course!"

"And *he* would not have known you, even had you arrived in time," added Lady Augusta, lowering her voice to the softest accents of sympathetic tenderness.

Basil Branchley said nothing. His lips were compressed

like granite; his face was very pale, but Lady Augusta thought she had never known him look so handsome.

"Oh, Basil," cried she, bursting into tears, "if only you had been here!"

"It is of no use talking of that, Augusta," said Basil, in a low, repressed voice. "Where is my mother?"

Lady Augusta drew back a little as they reached the open windows of the drawing-room.

"Go in, Basil," said she. "She is there." For Lady Augusta Trente felt instinctively that no eyes but those of Heaven should witness this first interview between the mother and son.

When Basil Branchley first learned from the family lawyers in London that he was fatherless, the shock had been almost overpowering; and when the obsequious porter at the Branchley railway station had addressed him as "Sir Basil," touching his hat as he did so, he had recoiled as from an actual blow; and the first entrance into the home which had always seemed with associations of his dead father was indescribably painful.

"Oh, Basil, Basil!" cried out the poor widowed lady, sobbing on her son's breast. "Why did you not come before? Why have you stayed away from *him* so long?"

"Mother," said Sir Basil, in a deep, low tone of suppressed emotion, "do not ask me. I think I was under a spell. God help me!"

It was quite dusk when Lady Branchley came out into the low garden seat under the lindens, where the River Usk flashed silver through the trees, and the autumn insects piped their shrill orchestra—the seat where Lady Augusta Trente was dreaming those first sweet dreams of love and hope which never come a second time.

"Augusta," said she. "My darling! why are you sitting here?"

Lady Augusta started up, blushing very red even in the purple twilight.

"I was watching the sunset," said she, rather confusedly.

"It has been set this hour. And you will catch cold. Come in, my love," urged Lady Branchley, "I want to talk to you about Basil. Is he not handsome? Has he not improved marvelously?"

And to these questions Lady Augusta assented heartily enough to satisfy even the fond mother.

"Am I to tell you what he says of you?" asked Lady Branchley, with an arch smile, as they re-entered the great

drawing-room, where lights had already been placed in the frosted silver candelabra, and a bright fire of Liverpool coal blazed under the draped marble mantel.

"Dear Lady Branchley," murmured Lady Augusta, "I am sure he could not have mentioned me at all. There was so much else to talk of."

"But he did, my darling," persisted Lady Branchley, fondly detaining the girl's fluttering hand. "He said you are grown lovelier than ever. He declared that you reminded him of some beautiful young Eastern sultana. And oh, Augusta, every word that he spoke in your praise found its echo in my heart. Now go and dress for dinner, and be sure you wear that dead white silk with the ivory ornaments, and the white stephanotis blossoms for your hair. For I want you to look your very, *very* best."

And Lady Augusta Trente came down to the dinner-table, fresh and beautiful, with the stephanotis in her hair and radiant roses glowing in her cheeks. Julian Branchley glanced up at her in his near-sighted way.

"Upon my word, Augusta," said he, "you look like a princess to-night."

Lady Augusta Trente laughed softly.

"You are all bent on flattering me, I think," said she, with a pretty self-consciousness that was not at all unbecoming.

But Sir Basil, at the head of his own table, was unusually absent and *distracte*.

"You will spend this first evening with us, Basil?" said his mother, as he rose after one cup of tea in the drawing-room.

"I must ask your forbearance, mother," said the young baronet, gently. "After to-night, my time shall be at your command. But I have a letter to write, which must not longer be delayed."

"What does he mean?" Lady Branchley asked of her younger son, when Sir Basil had left the room. Julian shrugged his shoulders.

"Upon my word, mother," said he, "it is impossible to say. Most probably it is some business affair to be settled. And besides, I dare say, the poor fellow is played out, with traveling night and day. He'll be fresher and more like himself in a day or two."

"Sing to me, darling," said Lady Branchley to her adopted daughter, when Julian had gone to his own room for some papers which he was engaged in assorting and cataloguing. "If once Basil hears your voice, he will be like the mariner of the Lotus Isle—he can not keep away."

But all the silver sweetness of Lady Augusta's delicious soprano voice, in the bland old ballads of their childhood, failed to beguile the solitary baronet from his writing-table in the low-ceiled old study, where his father's portrait looked gravely down upon him from above the carved wooden mantel and the shaded lamp cast a circle of brightness on the leather-covered desk.

CHAPTER XV.

JEALOUSY, THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

It was long past eleven o'clock; the smoldering logs in the deep-throated old chimney-place had long since fallen to ashes, and the Antwerp clock in the embrasure of the window was ticking with the loud, monotonous emphasis which clocks always assume toward the dead hours of the night, when Basil Branchley started at the light sound of a footstep on the faded crimson pile of the Persian carpet that covered the polished oaken boards of the floor.

He turned and saw the tall, slight figure of Lady Augusta Trente, robed in the soft, shining folds of the ivory-tinted dress—a figure which seemed all the brighter and more airy when outlined against the gloom and shadows of the somber apartment.

“Am I interrupting you?” she asked, with a pretty assumption of maidenly coyness.

“Not in the least,” he answered, with the air of one who is roused from a disagreeable reverie.

“Basil,” she said, with a sweet and winning smile, “Lady Branchley has sent me to ask you to return to the drawing-room. She is lonely to-night, and fears you are overtaxing yourself, after the long journey by sea and land which you have so lately experienced.”

He drew forward one of the leather-cushioned easy-chairs.

“Will you not sit down, Augusta?” said he. “I have something that I want to say to you.”

The deep scarlet suffused the girl's face as he spoke. Was it possible, she asked herself, with a joyous unleaping of every pulse, that her dreams were to be fulfilled so soon? that such a golden harvest of happiness was already within her reach? But she sat quietly down, mechanically holding up an embroidered satin screen between the lamp-light and her tell-tale face.

“To say to me?” she repeated, with a composure which was marvelous even to herself. “What is it, Basil?”

He had evidently finished his letter-writing, for a sealed missive lay on the table, close to his hand, and he was leaning back with folded arms and eyes fixed intently on the dying embers of the fire.

"Augusta," said he, fixing his eyes on her with an expression which she fancied she could at once interpret, "we have been fond of each other now for many years?"

"Yes," she responded, in a low voice.

"And so I may be pardoned for choosing you, even in preference to my mother, for my first confidante, after my long absence on the Western Continent."

Lady Augusta's heart beat high; the glad roses burned on her cheeks; but still she spoke not a word.

"Still," he added, slowly, "I scarcely know how to begin."

"I think," she hesitated, "that I can guess what you are going to say."

"Can you?" He turned brightly toward her, with both elbows resting on the library table. "Dear Augusta, I might have trusted implicitly in a woman's perception, I know; and yet it seems quite impossible that you should have conjectured *this*."

"You are not such an arch dissembler as you think," said she, for the first time allowing her eyes to meet his, with shy brilliance.

"Then tell me how my mother will receive the news?" said Sir Basil, vaguely wondering in what manner the tidings of his transatlantic marriage could possibly have transpired.

"Oh, Basil, can there be any question about that?" murmured Lady Augusta. "Of course she will be pleased."

"God bless you for those words!" he said, taking Lady Augusta Trent's hand in his. "Dear Augusta, you are a herald of good tidings to my doubting heart."

"She has always looked upon me as a daughter, you know," said unconscious Lady Augusta.

"Of course I may reckon upon your influence with her?" went on Sir Basil. "And I think, Augusta, we shall all be happy together."

"Oh, yes!" cried the girl, rather wondering, however, at the calm assurance with which Sir Basil Branchley seemed to take her consent for granted, before it had been asked in so many formal words. But she was too blindly, blissfully happy to stand on trifling points of ceremony just then.

"And you will scarcely wonder at the infatuation under

whose spell I acted so suddenly," added Sir Basil, "when you see her."

"See whom?" Lady Augusta's large dark eyes grew brighter and larger; the embroidered satin screen fell to the floor.

"Theodora!" Sir Basil answered, proudly. "My fair little American wife."

"Your—*wife*!" uttered Lady Augusta, almost in a shriek, as she rose to her feet and involuntarily clasped her hands together. "Basil Branchley, do you mean to tell me that you are—*married*?"

"I have been married for two years, Augusta," he answered, with a smile, although he could hardly comprehend the tumult of emotion which the tidings appeared to awaken in her mind. "And when you see Theodora and the two little twin children—"

Lady Augusta leaned against the edge of the table for support, but a cold, glittering smile came out around the corners of her mouth.

"You mean that I shall be very much surprised," said she. "Yes—I *am* surprised. Such news as this, Basil, is generally rather startling, just at the first."

"She has seen your picture, Augusta," he pleaded, "and read your letters."

"Indeed!" The hot crimson mantled Lady Augusta's fair face, even to the very roots of her hair, as she remembered the wording of those letters, and fancied to herself the expression with which Basil's *wife* would study them!

"And," he added, rather exceeding the truth in his anxiety to prepossess Lady Augusta in favor of his wife, "she is prepared to love you as a sister."

"She is very kind!" said Lady Augusta, coldly.

Sir Basil Branchley looked at her in surprise. He could not understand what chill blast had swept frigidly across the sunshine of her manner.

"Of course," said he, "traveling day and night as I did, in hopes of once more seeing my dear father alive, it was quite impossible for me to bring my wife and the little ones with me."

"Oh, quite," Lady Augusta mechanically echoed, thinking only of her own delusions.

"But I have written to them to come on at once, in charge of a trusty servant, and I shall meet them at Southampton. And if my mother can be reconciled to the unexpected idea of this new daughter—"

"Yes," hurriedly interposed Lady Augusta. "But I think, Basil, that perhaps you had better not trust to any intercession of mine in the matter. I—I might only prejudice her unfavorably. Believe me, it will be better for you to explain the entanglement yourself."

"Entanglement!" he repeated, with a slight frown.

"What else can you call a secret marriage of two years' duration?" returned Lady Augusta, icily. "Though, of course, she is very well-born and accomplished?"

"She's neither," he returned, quietly.

"Ah!" Lady Augusta was inclined to be cruel, in the bitterness of her disappointment. "Then it is a *mésalliance* instead of an entanglement."

"But she is very beautiful and winning," added Sir Basil, "and I am sure, Augusta, that you will love her."

"Oh, of course," said Lady Augusta. "But your mother is waiting for you in the drawing-room, Basil. Perhaps you had better go to her at once."

"And you, Augusta?"

"I shall go to my own room," said Lady Augusta. "My head aches, and the excitement of the day has wearied me."

"Good-night, then."

"Good-night."

As he held the door open with chivalrous politeness for her to pass out, a sudden light seemed to flash across his mind. Was it the expression of Lady Augusta Trente's darkly beautiful face, as she turned it for one second toward him, in the speaking of that "good-night," or was it something in the haughty grace with which she swept past him with the drooping stephanotis blossoms in her hair, and the ivory pendants swinging from her ears?

"Good heavens!" he uttered to himself, as he stood alone in the library, with the Antwerp clock ticking drearily, and the light glowing softly like a magnified moon, "can it be possible that she has ever cared for *me*?"

And in the next moment he rejected the idea from his mind, chiding himself for a conceited fool.

Five minutes later, however, when he dropped his letter into the post-bag on his way to the drawing-room, where his mother so anxiously awaited his presence, Lady Augusta Trente was standing at the further extremity of the hall, her white dress barred with the deep blue reflections from the stained-glass casement through which the moon was shining, her face strangely pallid in the unnatural light. He did not

see her, but she, intent and silent, watched his every movement.

“How handsome he is! how stately!” she murmured, wringing her hands in the blue glitter of the window. “Oh, Basil—*my* Basil no longer! Oh, my lost hope—my dead happiness!”

She hurried to her own room, where the fire burned low, and Priscilla, the maid, was yawning by the light of a bed-candle.

“You may go, Priscilla,” said she. “I shall not want you to-night.”

Priscilla obeyed gladly enough. And when she was alone Lady Augusta Trente walked deliberately up to the mirror, and looked herself in the face with a low, mocking laugh, that sounded strangely in the midnight silence of the room.

“People tell me that I am beautiful,” said she, “but where is the use of melting eyes, and hair like silk, and straight, insipid features, if they can not win you the one heart in all the world for which you care? I might as well be a toothless, grinning old hag, like blind Betty at the toll-house gates. Oh, vain, conceited idiot that I have been! wretched, broken-hearted woman that I shall be for all the miserable remnant of my days!”

With a passionate, choking cry she tore the fading blossoms from her hair, and flung away the ornaments with which she had so carefully decked herself so brief awhile ago.

“Fool! fool!” she kept repeating, under her breath, as she paced up and down the room, with hands now pressed upon her heart, now clasped wildly above her head, “to let myself love him when all his false and cruel heart is given to another! To tell him so, in almost so many words, when the love letter he had been writing to the woman who stole his heart away from me lay under his very hand—full of sweet words—brimming with honeyed phrases—oh, if I could tear it to pieces and scatter it to the four winds of heaven!”

She paused abruptly at this moment, as if some sudden fancy had occurred to her mind.

“And why should I not?” she asked herself. “It would at least be some compensation to me if I could make *her* suffer one pang like those that are rending my heart in pieces at this instant. And as for Basil, he deserves the cruelest stroke which Fortune can deal!”

Lady Augusta Trente noiselessly opened the door and looked out into the hall. All was still and deserted there, and she glided along the softly carpeted floor until she reached

the door of the state apartment, where Sir Reginald Branchley's dead body had lain in state. In one of the tiny drawers of the great black and gold chiffoniers there lay the particular key of the post-bag, which Sir Reginald had always carried in his vest-pocket during his life. She knew this, for she herself had placed it there when a servant had brought it to her in the first horror of the accident. The only other key was now in the possession of the widowed Lady Branchley herself.

Returning as quietly as she had gone, Lady Augusta took the post-bag from its accustomed place on the hall table, and unlocking it, took out the letter addressed to "Mrs. Basil Branchley, Eaglescliffe Hall, near Ballston, New York, U. S. A.," and secreted it in the pocket of her dress. She then relocked the bag, carried the key back to its place, and hurrying with velvet footsteps to her own room, thrust the letter deep down into the red embers of the fire. It blazed up, brightening the room with a momentary illumination, which shone strangely on Lady Augusta's white, set face, and then died down again.

"So it will be with the hopes in *her* heart," said Lady Augusta to herself.

CHAPTER XVI.

"NO LETTER TO-DAY."

"DOLLY to hum, eh?" said the sonorous voice of honest Reuben Hallowell.

The December snows were piled high against the fence of the Saratoga farm-house; the cold, glittering sunshine of a cloudless December day was turning the surface of the solitary meadows to sheeted diamonds, and the biting blast seemed to wreath the trees like an icy gladiator, as Reuben jumped out of the old-fashioned red cutter drawn by an old acquaintance—Bonny—with a paper package under his arm, and his face all blowsy and empurpled with the cold—so much of it, at least, as could be perceived between a red worsted comforter below and a bear-skin cap above.

At the cheery sound of sleigh-bells, Joanna Beck had hurried to the door, looking older and grislier and more rigid than ever, in a faded calico wrapper and shoes down at heel, while her hair, twisted into a tight knot at the back of her head, was skewered through as usual with the high horn-comb which was her favorite *coiffure*; and as she opened the door, the interior glimpse was by no means inviting, for the intense sunshine of the winter day brought out every crack in the ceil-

ing, every spot in the faded rag carpet, and every smoke-blotch on the walls; and, although Joanna was tolerably neat in her housekeeping, she had no idea whatever of taste or expediency in the hiding of such unsightly belongings. Over the stove sundry slices of ham were fizzling in a frying-pan, a card of fresh gingerbread had just been taken out of the oven, and a "Rebecca" tea-pot of dark-glazed ware was beginning to send forth a delicious odor of Souchong, while a table in the middle of the floor, spread with a scant and often-darned tablecloth, denoted that the midday meal was near at hand.

"Yes, she's to hum," said Miss Joanna, laying down the fork with which she had just turned one of the fast browning slices of ham. "She's in the front room with the children. Says the smell of the cooking makes her faint!"

"P'r'aps it does," said Reuben, warming his mittened hands over the stove.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Joanna. "I hate such fine lady airs. Many's the meal of victuals she's cooked in this very kitchen, and it never hurt her. But Mrs. Branchley and Dolly Beck are two very different people, it seems"—with a sniff that had nearly lifted her off her feet. "Got a letter for her?"

But before Reuben Hallowell could answer, the door of the inner apartment opened and a slight figure, dressed in a trailing dress of black silk, soiled and spotted with more than one trace of grease and stains, which was sufficiently ill-assorted with the other belongings of the scene, came in—Dora herself.

Yet not Dora as we beheld her last—all the radiance of youth, and health, and luxuriant surroundings. She was paler than of yore, and there was a wistful, anxious look shining out of her great, dark eyes which was new to them. Her lovely golden hair was carelessly fastened into a net at the back of her head, and the children's restless little fingers had torn away part of the lace frill that hung over her shoulder.

"I knew I should get a letter to-day, Reuben," said she, eagerly. "Give it to me!" and she held out her hand with the quick, impatient movement of old.

Reuben Hallowell glanced pityingly down upon her face.

"No, Dolly," said he, speaking as if the words hurt him, "there's no letter to-day."

Dora receded a step or two, the blank look of disappointment coming into her face like a gray shadow.

"But there *must* be!" said she. "Are you sure, Reuben? Quite sure?"

"I asked the post-office clerk myself," said Reuben. "And I looked over his shoulder while he was a sortin' out all the B's. And there warn't none there."

Theodora sunk down into one of the rush-bottomed kitchen chairs, with her eyes fixed vaguely on the flood of sunshine that poured through the uncurtained windows upon the floor.

"It's strange!" said she. "Very strange!"

"Humph!" commented Joanna, as she lifted the lid of the tea-pot and peered into its seething depths. Dora turned upon her with unexpected suddenness.

"I know what you mean, Joanna," said she. "But it isn't so."

"I didn't say nothing," remarked the elder sister, somewhat disconcerted.

"He never would forget me!" cried Dora, with her hand pressed to her throbbing throat. "No, never! He said he would write, and he *will*."

"Why don't he, then?" said Miss Joanna, grimly. "Come, dinner is ready. Sit by, Reuben, and take a bit of ham and eggs."

"I couldn't, thank'ee," said Reuben. "Mrs. Hallowell, she'll be expecting of me at home, and I'm late already. But I just fetched up a Noah's Ark and a nigger doll-baby for the children. Where be they, anyhow?"

But the sound of Reuben's voice had attracted the babies like a magnet—and they came toddling out of the front room, hand in hand, rosy little wee things, with tangled curls and short white dresses, not the elegant little human fashion-plates of Marie's Gallic reign, but healthy, hearty children, with cheeks like cherries, long-lashed, shining eyes, and faces all dotted over with dimples. They flung themselves on Reuben with the joyous, untranslatable chatter of infancy—and Reuben, sitting down on the floor in their midst, proceeded at once to unpack the mysteries of the brown paper parcels in his coat pockets.

"That's right, Nell," said Reuben, with a burst of laughter, as the little Helen began to walk up and down the room uttering a crooning sound, with the knitted doll in her arms, "put the nigger baby to sleep. Ain't that gal-nature, anyhow! And, Lordy me, whatever is Wally going to do with that there animal outen the Ark?"

For Walter had singled out some especial beast in painted wood and was stamping his small foot at it, and scolding in liquid inarticulates at the top of his shrill voice.

Theodora's sad face brightened into a smile.

“Don’t you see,” said she, “it’s a wolf? And Wally is always so interested in the story of ‘Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf?’”

“‘Little Wed Widing Hood!’” solemnly repeated the child. “Naughty Wolf!”

And catching up the unfortunate wooden presentment of the obnoxious animal, little Walter flung it into the red gulf of flame visible above the stove hearth.

Miss Joanna caught him by the blue-ribboned shoulder and gave him a shake.

“You little rascal!” cried she, sharply. “Burnin’ up the toys Reuben Hallowell has bought you!”

Little Wally, who had regarded himself as performing a righteous deed of retribution, looked up at his aunt, and burst into a shrill cry. Dora sprung forward and caught him in her arms.

“Joanna!” cried she, breathlessly, “how dare you?”

“How dare I *what*?” retorted Joanna. “Ain’t them precious young ones o’ your’n *never* to be corrected?”

“No!” cried Dora, with blazing eyes and cheeks glowing in two red spots, as she pressed the frightened baby close to her breast.

“There,” said Joanna, resignedly, as she turned to Reuben Hallowell, “that’s the way it always is. I can’t so much as look at them children but Dolly snaps my head off. And the dear knows it ain’t no way to bring up children!”

“You hadn’t ought to have touched the boy,” said Reuben, siding with the enemy at once.

“Fiddlesticks!” said Joanna. “And let him set the house afire, burnin’ up his new toys!”

“He didn’t mean no harm,” said Reuben, holding out his great red finger encouragingly, as little Wally, released from his mother’s grasp, came once more toward his Noah’s Ark, whose heterogeneous contents were scattered miscellaneously over the floor. “Halloo, Wally! Just look at that there humpy camel, and the cows with their curly horns!”

“Dinner’s ready and coolin’,” said Joanna, brusquely. Reuben rose to his feet, with a guilty glance at the clock.

“Twenty minutes past twelve,” said he. “I swan I hadn’t no idea it was so late.”

And, scrubbing Nelly’s satin cheek with his bearded good-bye kiss, and waving an adieu to Walter, who was solemnly comparing the different complexions of the wives of Noah’s sons, he hurried off to the red cutter and old Bonny.

Joanna looked after him with a grim smile.

"I reckon he'll catch it when he gets home," said she. "I wouldn't like to be in his shoes, not for consid'able. But it serves him right for marrying a woman with a temper like Almiry Higginbotham's."

Dora made no answer. She had drawn her chair up to the table in obedience to Joanna's imperious summons, and she was trifling with her tea-cup and a crust of bread, but she neither eat nor drank.

"She's as jealous of you as the old cat, Dolly," added Joanna, as she helped herself to a liberal slice of ham. "And I won't say but what she has reason."

Still Dora neither looked up nor answered. It was a question whether she even heard; but in a minute or two she lifted her large eyes to Joanna's face.

"Two months," said she. "Yes, it is two months and more."

Miss Joanna stared, with her tea-cup, like Mohammed's coffin, half-way between the heaven of her maiden lips and the earth of the homespun linen table-cloth.

"What on earth is the girl talking about?" said she.

"Since he went away," explained Dora.

"Oh!" said Miss Joanna—and Mohammed's coffin completed its journey.

"And it is so strange—so *very* strange—that I have received no letters!" added Dora.

"Humph!" commented Joanna, "I don't think it's strange at all."

Dora looked up sharply.

"What do you mean?" said she; but Joanna went on drinking her tea. The young wife rose and came around to her sister's chair.

"Joanna," said she, laying her hand on the elder woman's shoulder, and speaking in quick, breathless accents, "you *shall* speak out! You shall explain the meaning of all these hints, and whispers, and sidelong looks, whenever I speak my husband's name."

Joanna Beck pushed back her chair in extreme impatience.

"Well, then," said she, "if you must know, I don't think it's at all strange that Mr. Branchley—if that's his real name—don't write to you. I only think it's strange of you to expect it of him."

"You think he is coming back for me?"

"No, I don't," said Joanna, emphatically. "I think he's tired of you, and he's cleared out. That's my opinion, if you

really insist upon having it in plain words. And you needn't look as if you was a-goin' to eat me up for speakin' it out!"

Dora gave a little gasp, like a swimmer over whose head the strong waters are closing.

"But, Joanna," said she, faintly, "he—loved me!"

"He might have loved you once," said Joanna, buttering a huge half slice of bread, "but I guess all that sort of nonsense is over long ago. You've a temper, Dolly, that would try the patience of the Angel Gabriel, and you know it."

"He is my husband."

"P'r'aps he is, and p'r'aps he ain't."

"He *is*—he *is*!" Dora cried out, in tones half suffocated with anger, as she drew a small package from her bosom. "I have got my marriage certificate here—I remembered to take *that* when I left all else behind. Look, Joanna, look!"

"Oh, it's all right enough, I dare say," answered Miss Beck, indifferently. "You was a new toy then, and my fine gentleman didn't mind much what price he paid, so long as he got you. But may be he's realized, since then, that he paid rather dear for his bargain. And as for the certificate, what good does that do you, with him nobody knows where, and you tucked into the chimney-corner here, with the children pulling at your skirts? Don't you suppose a rich gentleman like him has enough ways of slipping out of a bargain like this, if he really wants to, no matter how legal and square it may be? Look you, Dolly, I never have *said* this before, but I've thought it all along, and I ain't the only one as thinks so, neither."

"It's false!" cried Dora, turning red and pale at this remarkably plain confirmation of the vague apprehensions which had more than once presented themselves to her own perplexed mind.

"It may be false," said Joanna, coolly, "but it looks uncommonly like the truth. Grand gentlemen like this Mr. Branchley don't marry working-girls over here and lift 'em up into their fine English castles, if so be as they've got any. They leave 'em in the gutters, where they found 'em. And it stands to reason they should!"

"Joanna!" cried Dora, stamping her foot on the ground in impotent rage, "be silent! How dare you speak thus to *me*?"

"Hoity-toity!" said Joanna, "what's this world coming to, that the plain truth ain't to be spoke without such a commotion as this?"

But even her adamant heart melted a little at the sight of poor, pretty Dora in a quivering heap on the floor, her golden

hair streaming over the carpet, her face hidden in her hands, her whole frame convulsed by sobs.

"Dolly," said she, "there's no use taking on like this. You've only got to make the best of it. You've many fine dresses and jewels, and it wouldn't be so bad, after all, if it wasn't for the children."

Dora sat up, and clasped little Nell's baby form in her arms, while Walter, dimly comprehending that some one was ill-using his mother, pounded with all the strength of his infantine fists at Aunt Joanna's ponderous calf-skin boot.

"If it wasn't for the children—*his* children and mine!" she wailed out. "Oh, how could I live without them? My little treasures—the only light in all my dreary life!"

And at the touch of Nelly's soft cheek against her own, the bitterness of her tears seemed to melt into something softer and more blessedly healing.

Long after the child had fallen asleep in her arms, Dora sat there on the floor, leaning her head against the wall and thinking.

Until those dreadful, solitary days under the blighting roof of the old farm-house, the possibility that Basil Branchley might have ceased to love her never had crossed Theodora's mind. She had been so certain of her empire over her husband's heart that she had stooped to no caressing blandishments, no soft, winning words to preserve it. And now that she began to comprehend that the past was indeed past, the whole depth and earnestness of her own feelings for the man burst on her consciousness like a mountain avalanche.

"Oh! I never knew—I never dreamed," she sobbed aloud in the extremity of her distress, "how dearly I loved him! I never knew how necessary he was to my life. I let him go away from me without a word or a smile, and now— Oh, Basil! oh, my husband! oh, God, have mercy on me, and bring his heart back to me!"

And when, half an hour afterward, Joanna came back from the upstairs regions, where she had been busied in some unaccountable saturnalia, she found Dora asleep on the floor, with her head against the wall, and the traces of tears on her cheeks.

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. HALLOWELL'S OPINION.

MRS. REUBEN HALLOWELL was in no very agreeable frame of mind.

She stood in the middle of her kitchen with a note in her hand, a sealed note, which she was turning upside down and downside up, and surveying from every possible point of the compass. Little had the unsuspecting clam-peddler dreamed, when he left this innocent-looking document at the door, with the curt message, "You're to give it to the boss when he comes home," what an Archimedean lever of trouble it would prove.

The kitchen, with its brilliant Venetian carpeting, ball-fringed window-curtains of snowy dimity, and black-leaded kitchen stove, presented a notable contrast to the dreary domains in which Miss Joanna Beck reigned supreme. Scarlet geraniums, with round scalloped leaves, like green velvet, and trusses of vivid bloom, filled up the deep window-sills; presses of china, and delf, and Britannia ware occupied the corners, and a tall clock, for which an antiquary had once offered a hundred dollars in vain—a clock inherited by Mrs. Reuben Hollowell from her Higginbotham ancestry, who were notable people—stood in the corner, with a brass face and a body of carved black oak, representing all the signs of the zodiac in most improbable and back-breaking positions. For Almira Higginbotham had been a rustic heiress, and as people thereabouts expressed it, "had money out to interest."

But greenbacks and accumulated interest can not always purchase domestic bliss, and since Miss Joanna Beck's married sister had come home to live at the "Poplar Corners"—as the old homestead of the Beck family was popularly characterized—Almira Hollowell had been a miserable young matron. She had always been rather addicted to jealousy, and now she firmly believed that her husband was falling, with most culpable willingness, into the toils of this dark-eyed Philistine with the golden hair, who dragged her long-skirted dresses over the muddy roads, and tacitly insulted the ladies of the vicinity by wearing silks and satins, and even diamonds ("though of course," Mrs. Hollowell remarked to her neighbor, Mrs. Jedediah Linkwater, "they're not *real*!") when they, the ladies aforesaid, could boast only calicoes, French poplins, and Whitby jet.

These offenses, taken in conjunction with the fact that Mrs. Branchley was popularly considered "stuck-up," in withholding her presence from divers and sundry quilting-parties, spelling-bees, and tin-wedding celebrations in the vicinity, were in themselves, as any unprejudiced female must admit, intolerable. But when superadded to these facts came the terrible suspicion that the golden-haired Philistine was "mak-

ing eyes" at her own lawful husband, who was universally conceded to have been partial to her, the golden-haired Philistine, in ante-nuptial days, the matter became beyond all bearing; and Mrs. Reuben Hollowell had made up her mind that she wouldn't bear it any longer.

"I 'most know it's from her," said Mrs. Reuben Hollowell, with compressed lips and eyes darting fire, "and I'll find out what's in it, or my name ain't Almiry."

The tea-kettle was singing melodiously over the black-leaded stove, in preparation for the noonday cup of tea. Mrs. Hollowell advanced resolutely toward it, and holding the intercepted epistle in the cloud of steam for a minute or so, unsealed the envelope with the greatest ease.

"I won't be put upon no longer," said Mrs. Hollowell, as she unfolded the half sheet of pink paper, and read, in a straggling, feminine hand:

"DEAR REUBEN,—Will you meet me at the Mistletoe Wood this afternoon at five? I want to speak to you.

"THEODORA."

The letter dropped from Mrs. Hollowell's almost paralyzed fingers.

"Well, I never!" cried she. "The impudence of that bold-faced, domineering, dressed-up grass-widow! 'Dear Reuben'—indeed! 'The Mistletoe Wood at five o'clock'—and just because it is a lonesome place where nobody ever goes! 'Theodora'—indeed! I wouldn't ha' believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes!"

But in spite of her righteous indignation, Mrs. Reuben Hollowell had a shrewd eye to expediency, and she lost no time in resealing the letter by the aid of a dab of mucilage, and placing it in a conspicuous place on the wooden mantel, where it would be sure to attract the attention of her unconscious husband when first he should cross the domestic threshold.

"Now we'll see!" said Almira Hollowell.

Presently Reuben came in, ruddy and smiling, bringing with him an exhilarating whiff of the delicious winter air.

"Well, Almiry," said he, chucking his better half under her sharp chin—Mrs. Reuben Hollowell belonged to the spare and angular order of women—"hain't Deacon Dredmore sent no word about them oxen?"

"There's no word been sent," said Mrs. Hollowell. "Not except that there letter on the mantle-tree."

Reuben took down the letter and opened it, all unaware that

the faded blue eyes of his wife were fixed keenly upon him. He read it through twice, and then placed it carefully in the inner pocket of his capacious waistcoat.

"Is it about the oxen?" said Mrs. Almira, with a peculiar smile.

"N—no," said Reuben, coloring a little, for he knew his wife's weakness in regard to the dark-eyed resident of the Poplar Corner farm-house; "it's business."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Hollowell, digging her needle viciously into the seam she was engaged in sewing up.

And that evening, in the orange glow of a superb December sunset, Dora Branchley hurried down a leafless lane of maple-trees to a lonely copse situated in a desolate valley, and commonly known as the Mistletoe Wood, there to find honest Reuben Hollowell leaning against a fence and industriously occupied in chewing a straw.

"Well, Dolly," said he, "I'm here."

"Yes," said Dora, hurriedly. "You see, Reuben, I wanted to speak to you when Joanna could not hear every word I say."

"All right," said Reuben. "Go ahead."

"I want some money," began Dora.

Reuben thought of his account at the Saratoga bank; but before he could find words to mention it, Dora went on:

"I've got two rings and a little brooch that Basil—my husband—gave me. Diamonds, Reuben—see?" and opening a little pasteboard box, she disclosed to his astonished eyes the glitter of rare stones.

"Is *them* diamonds?" said Reuben, peering curiously into the box. "Blessed if ever I seed any afore, except the Californy kind."

"But these are real," said Dora, regarding their sparkle with instinctive fondness; "and worth—oh! a deal of money."

"Well?" said Reuben.

"And I want you to sell them for me," said Dora. "At Saratoga I can't go myself, because I've no way to get to the village, and Joanna asks so many questions. But I thought, Reuben, that, for the sake of old times, you might perhaps oblige me."

"That I will," said Reuben, heartily. "You might ha' knowed that, Dolly, without askin'."

"Yes," said Dora, "I was sure of it. You were always good to me, Reuben."

As she spoke, she placed the little pasteboard box in his hands.

"Hold on a bit," said Reuben. "There's two rings and a brooch?"

"Yes; I told you so."

"And how much money do you expect to get for 'em?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Dora, vaguely. "A hundred dollars, perhaps."

"Diamonds is worth a deal of money," remarked Reuben; "but second-hand things don't fetch first-hand prices."

"They are not second-hand," cried Dora; "they are quite new."

"A thing is second-hand if you've worn it twice," said Reuben. "However, I'll do my best, Dolly; you may be quite sure of that."

"And when?" urged Dora; "I mean, how soon? Because I want the money, Reuben, oh! so much."

"Will the day after to-morrow do?" asked Reuben.

"If you can't go sooner."

"I *might* manage it to-morrow," said Reuben, having recourse to a fresh straw, "if I turn and twist matters a little."

"Oh, Reuben! if you only could!" cried Dora, eagerly, laying her hand on his arm.

"I will," said Reuben; "blessed if I don't! But look here, Dolly. You ain't going home already?"

"I must," said Dora, with an apprehensive glance at the sky, which the pale orange of the sunset was deepening into crimson. "I have to put the children to bed."

"I'll walk with you as far as the Corners," said Reuben, diving his huge hand down into his outside pocket. "And I say, Dolly, here's some cakes of maple sugar for the children."

"Oh, Reuben, how good you are!" said Dora, melted into positive animation by this tribute to Wally and little Nell.

"Very good, *indeed!*" echoed a shrill voice, in mocking accents, and Mrs. Reuben Hollowell herself stepped out from behind the screen of a huge cluster of wild laurels whose ever-green leaves grew on the edge of the copse. "But perhaps you'll be so good, Mrs. Branchley, as to remember that Reuben Hollowell is a married man."

Dora looked up in surprise.

"I don't understand you, Mrs. Hollowell," said she.

"Don't you, indeed?" said Almira, viciously. "P'r'aps, if you've a husband of your own—"

"Almiry, hush!" interposed Reuben, who was only just be-

ginning to recover from the shock of seeing his lady wife in this unexpected spot and season.

"You hadn't better call on other womens' husbands to do your errands!" added Almira.

"Is it wrong?" said Dora, looking piteously up into Reuben's face. "I—I didn't think of that. And Reuben was always so kind to me in the old times."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Hollowell. "So I have heard. If you'll give me your arm, Reuben, I'm going on to the store."

Reuben hesitated.

"I was going to see Dolly as far as the Corners," said he.

Mrs. Hollowell jerked her hand out of her husband's arm.

"Oh, pray don't let *me* stand in the way," said she. "Of course *I* can go about my business quite alone. *I* am only your lawful wedded wife, but everybody knows how attractive Mrs. Branchley is!"

Poor Dora looked frightened.

"Go with her, Reuben, pray," she said. "Don't mind me—it's only a few steps, and I am quite used to going by myself about these quiet roads."

And she disappeared, like a flitting gray shadow, down the twilight road, while Mr. Hollowell turned to his wife.

"Almiry," said he, conciliatingly, "don't be vexed."

"Oh, I'm not vexed. Not in the least," said Mrs. Hollowell. "Of course I know I ain't to be compared with Mrs. Branchley! If *I* was to write sly notes to other womens' husbands, and meet 'em after dark—"

"It ain't after dark, Almiry," interposed poor harried Reuben.

"It's near enough to it, then," sputtered his wife. "If I was to cut up such capers, folks would talk. But *I* ain't Dolly Branchley!"

"Won't you take my arm?" said Reuben, meekly.

"No, I won't," said his wife. "I'll leave *that* sort of thing to Dolly Branchley."

"Almiry, *don't!*"

Mrs. Hollowell burst out into hysterical laughter.

"You thought you was managing the matter so sly, *didn't* you?" said she. "But *I* knew all about it."

"It wasn't no harm, Almiry."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Mrs. Hollowell, with a toss of the head. "Going to Saratoga, and selling diamonds on the sly, so that no questions should be asked. Raising money to elope with *you*, I shouldn't wonder."

"Almiry!"

But Mrs. Hallowell had no sort of mercy on her unfortunate spouse, and his homeward walk that evening was over no path of roses.

While poor Dolly, hurrying back to the solitary farm-house, under the poplar-trees, was tasting all the bitterness of the cup which she herself had once held so relentlessly to Edith Maydew's shrinking lips.

Was it a Nemesis? Theodora Branchley had never heard of the fabled embodiment of all Retribution, but she felt in her heart that she was only meeting with her just deserts.

"If I had all my life to live over again," thought this sad little philosopher of eighteen, "I should do very differently."

It was not easy to evade Joanna's sharp queries when she returned; but when at last she was safe in the refuge of her own room, lulling little Wally to sleep with a soft, sweet nursery song, while Helen played with her pink toes before the blaze of the pine logs, a great longing took possession of her heart, and she cried aloud to the dreary silence:

"Oh, Basil! Oh, my husband! if I could only see your dear face, just for one little minute, what would I not give?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

GOING AWAY.

WHEN Reuben Hallowell came to the Poplar Corners the next evening, he was accompanied by his wife, in a rustling new dress, with a green velvet bonnet profusely trimmed with orange flowers, and a pair of cheap kid gloves, which were one size too small for her hands.

"She *would* come," said Reuben, in a deprecatory whisper, which Almira's ear was swift to detect.

"Why shouldn't I?" said she. "If Mrs. Branchley's society is so agreeable, there is no reason why I shouldn't enjoy it as well as other people."

"I am very happy to see you, Mrs. Hallowell," said Dora, with a quiet dignity which disarmed Almira's words of half their sting.

"And here's the money," added Reuben. "I couldn't keep it secret from Almira. She *would* insist on going everywhere I did all day long."

"And who has a better right, I wonder?" put in Mrs. Hallowell, with a venomous toss of her head.

"Ninety-five dollars," said Reuben. "It ain't much, but it was all I could get."

"I am very much obliged to you, I am sure," said Dora, hurriedly placing the notes in her little pearl porte-monnaie, a relic of past grandeur. Reuben looked inquiringly around the room.

"Children in bed?" said he.

"Oh, yes, long ago," said Dora. "Joanna doesn't like them to be around after candle-light; she wants her evenings to herself, she says. And Nelly has the knitted doll clasped close in her arms, dear little thing!"

Mrs. Reuben Hollowell looked keenly at her husband; even the smile that softened his rugged features at the mention of the child was an offense to her.

"What doll?" said she, sharply.

"A doll that Reuben gave her," said unconscious Dora.

"Humph!" commented Almira. "I've a married sister with six dear little ones, but Reuben never gave none o' *them* knitted dolls."

Reuben Hollowell rose up hurriedly and began to wind the coils of his capacious red comforter around his neck.

"I guess p'r'aps we may as well be going," said he.

And when the door had closed behind the married pair, Joanna looked contemptuously at her sister.

"Dolly," said she, "you're a fool, and always were!"

"I don't know what you mean, Joanna."

"Why didn't you hold your tongue about Reuben giving that doll to the child?"

"Ought I to have done so?" said innocent Dolly. "Was there any harm in it?"

"*Harm!* no. But Almiry Higginbotham always was jealous of you, and Reuben will wish the doll in Jericho, I guess, afore he hears the last of it."

"Nonsense!" said Dora, half angrily. "But, Joanna, look here; do I owe you much money?"

Joanna's cold eyes glimmered at the mention of lucre.

"Considerable," said she

Dora's countenance fell.

"It can't be so very much," said she. "And there are my dresses, and the red coral set that you liked, and the long gold chain."

"Yes, I know," said Joanna; "I've put it all down to a regular debit and credit account, and you owe me thirty dollars yet."

"Thirty dollars!" Dora pondered for a minute. "Joanna, there is the sealskin sacque. Would you like that?"

Once again Miss Beck's fishy orbs sparkled with speculative luster.

"I don't mind," said she, careful not to display any undue eagerness. "Though, to be sure, it is only second-hand."

"Basil gave two hundred dollars for it, and I wore it only one winter."

"I wouldn't be willing to allow more than fifty for it."

"Then it shall be yours," said Dora, hurriedly. "And, Joanna, here are twenty-five dollars more—for the children, you know, while I am gone."

"Gone where?" sharply demanded the elder sister, with the roll of bills firmly clasped in her hand.

"I forgot that I had not told you," said Dora, nervously playing with the ribbon loops on the pocket of her dress. "I am going to my husband."

"To—*England*?" exclaimed Joanna.

"Yes, or wherever he is. I must know the mystery of his long silence," cried out Dora, piteously. "I must see him!"

"And the children?"

"I can't take them with me, you know, Joanna," pleaded Dora. "They are so little and so tender—and if you will keep them here, and be good to them, I will pay you well. There's the sealskin sacque and the twenty-five dollars, and I'll send you some more, Joanna, when I get to my husband. And then we shall come back after them as soon as possible."

Joanna shook her head discouragingly.

"It's only a wild-goose chase, Dolly," said she. "If he wanted you, he'd have come for you long ago, or written, or something."

"He *does* want me," Dora responded, quietly. "And he *has* written—but somehow I haven't received his letters."

"Humph!" grunted Joanna, incredulously.

"Joanna!" appealed the poor girl, in tears.

"If you'll take my advice," said the elder sister, "you'll stay where you are and make up your mind to support yourself and the children the best way you can."

"Ah!" said Dora, softly, "you think he has deserted me. But you don't know Basil as I do. He *loves* me, Joanna."

To this Miss Joanna made no reply, unless a very meaning compression of the lips and shrug of the shoulders might be construed into a reply.

"You'll take good care of Wally and Nell while I am gone, dear Joanna?" pleaded the younger sister. "It will only be for a little while, and they are so small and helpless. Promise me that, Joanna."

She looked such a very child herself, as she knelt entreatingly on the floor at her sister's feet, with imploring eyes and disheveled golden hair, that even Joanna's adamant heart was softened a little.

"It'll take pretty much all my time," said she, as if reluctantly. "And I never was partial to children."

"But I will pay you well," urged Dora. "Dear Joanna, promise me. And we will come back, Basil and I, almost before you know it. And I'll send you some money as soon as I get there, Joanna; see if I do not."

Joanna Beck hesitated. The laundry business was necessarily dull at this time of year, and Miss Joanna loved money. And although, as she had frankly stated, she was not fond of children, yet she thought she might manage to make a decent living by taking charge of her small nephew and niece as well as by any other way.

"And if anything should happen to 'em, why, we're all in the hands of Providence," was Miss Joanna Beck's pious reflection.

"Well," she said aloud, at length, "I don't mind if I do. But mind it ain't long that you're gone."

So Dora packed up a little bag of the very plainest of her belongings, and prepared for the long journey of which, poor child, she had so vague an idea.

All that she knew was that she was going to Basil—to the husband whom she had sent away from her with such cruel coldness, and whose love she had spurned so often! For now it seemed to the poor heart-hungry girl that one of Basil's loving smiles would be worth a life-long pilgrimage—one of the tender words she had so despised would fill her yearning soul with rapture.

But when, in the cold, gray dawn of the winter's morning, she crept to the bedside of her little children, to whisper a last farewell into their slumbering ears, it seemed as if her heart would break:

"Oh, my treasures, my darlings!" she whispered, with the strong sobs rending all her frame, in the vain effort to repress them, "how can I go away and leave you? Oh, my babies, my little ones!"

Joanna Beck pulled her violently away with one hand, while with the other she shaded the flame of the lamp on the table.

"Dolly," she whispered, "are you crazy? Do you want to rouse 'em up, and have a scene? And the horse and wagon are waiting, and you've no more than time to get to the depot."

But still Dora lingered, with clasped hands and streaming eyes, for one last glance at little Nell, who lay, rosy and flushed with slumber, with both her arms thrown around Wally's plump neck. Truly they were as lovely as infant cherubs in their sleep, and the young mother might well be pardoned for the gaze of almost adoring tenderness which she bent upon their slumbering forms. For a second she fell on her knees in wild, unsyllabled prayer, which was like the wrestling of Jacob with the angel, and cheeks all wet with tears. And then the little sleepers were alone—and motherless.

And when the good steamer "Severns" sailed from New York harbor the next day at noon, Theodora Branchley sat among the crowd of steerage passengers, white and silent, and half terrified at her own adventurous temerity. But as the white caps of the sea flashed beyond the rocky walls of the Narrows, and the fresh salt wind lifted the golden tendrils of hair from her forehead, she kept reassuring herself by repeating, over and over again, in a whisper:

"I am going to my husband!"

CHAPTER XIX.

"ADOPTED."

"I MIGHT ha' knowed it," said Joanna Beck.

She was scrubbing her kitchen floor with sleeves rolled up, head tied into a pocket-handkerchief, and pail of seething soapsuds set close to her—and as she scrubbed she pondered.

Down by the Great Rock the first April violets were beginning to purple the sunny slopes; along the edges of the woods the maples hung out their crimson banners, and in low swampy grounds the willow catkins swung to and fro in the early spring wind. Through the open window Joanna could hear the shrill baby voices of Walter and Helen as they played in the sunny chip-yard, and the bluebirds were whistling in the crests of the tall Lombardy poplars in front of the door.

For April had come, with its changing showers and sunshine—and Joanna had heard no word from her sister. It was not only that the promised remittance had failed to come, but Theodora had not even taken the trouble to write back to Saratoga. And the slender supply of money had given out, and the children were ragged and needed new clothes, and Miss Joanna's heart was angry and sore within her as she reluctantly admitted to herself the fact that she had been out-generated by that sly little sister of hers.

"Yes," muttered she, scrubbing vigorously away with set teeth and frowning brow, "I might ha' knowed it. And it serves me right for being such an everlasting fool! She never meant to come back no more than her fine husband did—and here I be, with them two young ones on my hands, hard and fast for the rest of my life. But I won't be made an orphan asylum of, not if I know it. It's a regular swindle, and I ain't a-goin' to stand it! Now, then, boy, what's wanting?"

For little Walter's rosy face had peeped wistfully around the corner of the open door, with flaxen curls blown about by the wind, and a plentiful tattooing of dirt around his cherry mouth.

"Please," said Walter, with his finger in his mouth, "me wants a piece of bread."

"A piece of bread!" echoed Miss Joanna, scrubbing harder than ever. "Yes, that's the cry. A piece of bread and a drink of milk, and this thing, and that thing, and the t'other thing. Something always wanting, and not a minute of peace for me!"

"Please," reiterated Walter, raising his small voice a semi-tone or so, "me wants a piece of bread."

"You'll just wait until I am ready to give it to you," said Joanna. "And it won't be just this minute, neither."

Little Walter sat down in a docile fashion on the doorstep, to wait his grim aunt's convenience; but just at that moment he caught sight of the kitten asleep on the sunny window-sill, and, forgetful of all else, he started up with a glad cry and ran across the room, leaving the marks of his little ragged boots on every board of the newly scrubbed floor.

"Well, I *never*!" said Miss Joanna, scrambling to her feet. "Hain't I told you again and again, Walter Beck, never to step on a wet floor?"

And catching up the child, she gave him an infuriated shake, supplemented by a sound cuff on each side of the head.

"There," said she, thrusting him into an odd little three-cornered closet which occupied one angle of the room, and shutting and fastening the door, "stay there until you can learn to behave yourself properly. I ain't going to mince matters any longer with such a beggar's brat as you!"

Poor little Walter, hurt and frightened, set up a piteous cry in the Egyptian darkness of his prison cell, and Miss Joanna set herself to work as energetically as possible to erase the marks of the tiny transgressor's boots.

"It's enough to drive one crazy," said Joanna Beck, despairingly. "And here comes the other young 'un, too!"

For little Helen, attracted by the sound of her brother's wailings, had trudged around the corner of the wood-house, holding a battered doll tightly in her arms, with her faded sun-bonnet hanging by its knotted strings down her back, and the yellow hair tangled over her great wondering eyes.

"Where's Wally?" she demanded, with a stamp of her foot. "Me want Wally."

"Don't you dare to step on my clean floor, or I'll skin you alive!" said Joanna, heedless of the question propounded.

But just at that minute Walter succeeded in bursting open the closet door, which was secured only by a ruinous wooden button, and stood there, beautiful, rebellious, and tear-stained.

"Nelly!" he called out, piteously, outstretching his arms to his only friend, "Nelly!"

And little Helen, heedless of her aunt's threat, ran across the room to him, and thrust the doll into his face, as if to comfort him, while she threw both arms around his neck and mingled her sobs and tears with his.

Poor little forsaken wretches, they had called plaintively for their "mamma! mamma!" until the word had dropped, forgotten, from their lips; they had cried themselves to sleep night after night, and wakened with a vague sense of something gone and lacking from their lives, which, in their child-philosophy, they were unable to explain. And it was a pitiful sight to all the soft-hearted mothers of the neighborhood as they drove by, to see the little twins sitting hand in hand on the sunny door-sill, or playing in the road, with hair all blown about and hands empurpled with cold.

Miss Joanna was wiping the soapsuds from her hands to execute prompt vengeance on these two tiny rebels, when the rattle of wheels up the road distracted her attention for a minute.

"It's a lady and gentleman," said Miss Joanna, looking out of the window, "in a one-horse shay. Bless us, whatever can they want? And, as true as I live, they're stopping here!"

She made haste to unpin her dress, roll down her sleeves, and unfasten the handkerchief from around her head, before she went to the front door.

"Does Miss Beck live here?" said a pale, sweet-faced lady who sat in the chaise, all wrapped in cashmere shawls, balmy though the April morning was, while the gentleman at her side busied himself with the reins.

"That's me, ma'am, at your service," said Joanna, dropping her lowest courtesy.

"Indeed!" said the lady. "I am Mrs. Cheswick."

"Pleased to see you, ma'am, I'm sure," said Miss Joanna, with a second courtesy. "Won't you walk in?"

The lady complied with the invitation, saying as she did so: "I have just come to Saratoga to drink the spring waters, and I have been recommended to you as a laundress."

"Much obliged, ma'am, to them as spoke a good word for me," said Joanna, secretly elated at the prospect of business.

Mrs. Cheswick looked around the uninviting room with a shudder. How was it possible, she asked herself, that people could live all the year round in such a dreary place as this? And just then the sound of a smothered sob caught her ear.

"Is there a child here?" she asked, glancing around with some curiosity.

"Two of 'em, worse luck," said Miss Joanna, grimly, as she opened the door of the adjoining room, where the newly scrubbed floor was steaming, and little Walter stood in the three-cornered cupboard like a tiny statuette in its niche, with blue, long-lashed eyes, hair all burnished with golden gleams, and cheeks stained with tears and dirt—while Helen sat on the floor at his feet, persistently poking the battered doll against him, as if it were some amulet of consolation and comfort.

"Oh! how lovely!" cried out the lady, enthusiastically. "Clarence! Clarence! do come and look at these beautiful children! La Vecchio would delight in copying them for cherubs."

"They are pretty little elves enough," said Mr. Cheswick, who stood in the door-way, laughing.

"Handsome is as handsome does," remarked Miss Beck, austere. "And they're a dreadful charge to a lone creetur like me."

"But aren't you afraid of the dear little things taking cold in this damp room?" questioned the lady. Miss Beck gave a contemptuous snort of negation.

"Cold, indeed!" said she; "they never take nothing, ma'am! Every other child in the neighborhood had scarlet fever and measles last winter, and these young 'uns came off scot free, if you'll believe me, ma'am. Oh, no, *they* won't take cold!"

"Whose children are they?" asked Mrs. Cheswick, who had knelt down on the floor and held out both hands to the little boy.

"Well, ma'am, it ain't a pleasant story to tell," said Joanna; "but they're my sister's children. And she's deserted 'em, ma'am, and left 'em on my hands; and, I don't

know but I shall have to turn 'em over to the poorhouse, for it's all I can do to provide for myself, let alone a parcel of great hungry children, as wears out shoes and clothes enough to frighten one."

"Deserted them!" cried the lady. "Oh, poor, lovely little lambs! And their own mother, too! Oh, she must have had a heart of stone!"

"That's just what I say myself, ma'am," said Joanna.

"But where is the father?" asked Mr. Cheswick.

"They ain't got none, sir," said Joanna, averting her face, primly. "He run off before she did."

The tears gushed into Mrs. Cheswick's eyes; she bent caressingly over little Walter who, attracted by her sweet voice and winning smile, had walked straight up to her and was now timidly stroking down the pile of her velvet cloak.

"Poor child," said she. "But surely, surely, you would not send a child like this to the *poorhouse*?"

"I'm afeard I shall be obliged to, ma'am," said Joanna.

"Poor folks can't pick and choose like their betters. Walter Beck, keep your hands off the lady's cloak!"

"Oh, don't stop him; he is doing no harm, dear little rosebud," said Mrs. Cheswick, passing one arm caressingly around the plump little figure. "Clarence, do look at his eyes—aren't they lovely? And such a complexion as he has!"

"I think it might be a little improved by soap and water," said Mr. Cheswick, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Walter, come here this minute and have your face washed," cried Joanna, clutching at the wash-rag that hung over the sink. But Walter demurred to this proceeding, which was invariably connected in his mind with rasped eyelids, nose rubbed relentlessly up the wrong way, and brown soap smarting in his mouth.

"No!" said Walter, sturdily, as he nestled yet closer to his new friend, in whom he instinctively recognized a tower of strength. "Me stay here!"

"Come here at once!" shrilly ejaculated his aunt.

"Me *won't*!" deliberately answered Walter. "Me like lady—me stay here."

Mrs. Cheswick clasped him to her bosom.

"Oh, Clarence!" said she, "only hear him! The dear little fellow! Oh, Clarence, if I might only adopt him and take him away with me!"

Mr. Cheswick uttered a long, low whistle.

"My dear Fanny," said he, "are you crazy?"

"But why not?" pleaded Mrs. Cheswick. "He is so beau-

tiful, and so friendless; and I dare say we could have him unconditionally."

"Oh, certainly!" chimed in the delighted Miss Joanna, "and glad of the chance."

"He should never tease or annoy you in the least," persisted Mrs. Cheswick, "and it would make me so very, *very* happy! Dear Clarence, do say yes!"

Now Mrs. Clarence Cheswick was an heiress in her own right, and a fanciful invalid into the bargain, and Mr. Clarence Cheswick was a good deal in the habit of letting her have her own way on all occasions. And when she looked so pleadingly up into his face and uttered the words, "Dear Clarence, *do* say yes," with such beseeching emphasis, there was nothing left for him but to say, "Yes."

"Get his things," said Mrs. Cheswick, radiantly. "Tie on his hat, please. We'll take him away with us."

So that Miss Beck not only gained a good customer upon this sunshiny April morning, but succeeded in getting rid of baby Walter. She bundled up his worn-out little clothes as rapidly as possible, lest the fine lady should change her mind, and carried them out to the carriage.

"They're but poor duds, ma'am," said she, with an apologetic courtesy; "but you'll please to remember I'm very poor, and can't dress the little darling as I'd like."

And she put up her face to kiss the child good-bye as she spoke, but Walter pushed her away.

"Go 'way, Joanna!" said he, with energy. "Wally don't love Joanna."

Mr. Cheswick burst out laughing.

"A pretty young eaglet you have undertaken to rear!" said he to his wife. "I wish you joy of your bargain, that's all."

"I don't blame the child," said Mrs. Cheswick, smiling, in spite of Miss Beck's very evident discomfiture, as they drove away.

Joanna went back into the kitchen, and relieved her mind by boxing Helen's ears, as that deserted little maiden sat bewailing her solitary condition on the floor.

"Now will you hold your tongue?" demanded Joanna. "I wish to goodness they'd taken you too!"

"I want Walter," sobbed Helen, beating her doll's head against the wall. "Where is Walter?"

"The Black Man has eaten him up," said Miss Joanna, with an angry stamp of her foot; "and he'll eat you up too, if you don't quit bellowing."

Helen stopped crying for a moment, with a half-frightened

look around her. But apparently she came to the conclusion that the Black Man, in all his vague terror, could not be much worse than her aunt Joanna, and resumed her lamentations on a rather lower key than before.

But Miss Joanna went back to her house-work, secretly exultant.

"I've got rid of one of 'em," said she to herself, "and it shall go hard but I'll get rid of the other one. And I guess now's as good a time as ever to accept Cousin Seba Sniffen's offer to go to Vermont and help her in her factory boardin'-house. I'll just go away quietly some night, and take care not to let nobody know where I'm bound for. For I don't relish the idea of having Dora's young ones returned on my hands. If I get good homes for 'em, that's all she's any right to expect of me, and more too."

As Joanna Beck moved briskly about the room, intent on various household cares, her mind was as busy as her footsteps in contriving some method of ridding herself of Sir Basil Branchley's helpless little daughter.

"I *won't* drag that child around the country with me, that's flat!" said she, grinding her teeth together.

Just then the rattling of wagon-wheels over the stony road attracted her attention, and, peeping furtively through the slats of the milk-room window, she saw Mrs. Reuben Hallowell drive by, in the scarlet shawl and green velvet bonnet, with another village gossip seated snugly at her side.

"It's a good idea!" said Miss Beck, with a grim smile. "I'll try Reuben Hallowell."

CHAPTER XX.

LITTLE HELEN.

MISS JOANNA BECK lost no unnecessary time in donning her own walking attire, and tying on little Helen's blue velvet hood and cape, from which the moth-eaten edges of swan's-down had long ago dropped away; for she fully understood how much easier it would be to work upon honest Reuben Hallowell's feelings in the absence of his wife.

"Come, child," said she, brusquely, to the little girl; "don't drag back so. We're going to take a walk."

Helen looked up with a sudden brightening of her baby face.

"Doin' to find Wally?" asked she, eagerly.

"Yes," nodded her aunt, who did not regard it necessary

to adhere to the truth when children were in question; "we're going to find Wally. Step lively, now, or may be he'll be gone."

It was a long walk over the muddy roads to the Hallowell farm-house, but Miss Joanna abridged the route somewhat by means of sundry field-paths and by-lanes, and reached the house in about half an hour, with her temper nowise sweetened by having had to carry little Helen more than half the way.

"I don't see what children was made for," said the spinster, sourly.

Reuben Hallowell himself was at the back of the house splitting wood, as his unexpected visitors approached. He dropped the ax, and came, with a broad smile, to greet them.

Little Helen laughed and crowed, and held out both hands as he took her in his arms.

"Halloo, little one!" said he. "Ain't this 'ere a stroke of good luck, though? And where's Wally?"

"Wally gone," said Helen, shaking her curly head. "All gone!"

"Eh?" said Reuben, looking inquiringly at Joanna.

"It's true enough," said she. "He *has* gone."

"Where?" said Reuben. "You ain't got news of Dolly, have you? She ain't come back for the children?"

"No," answered Joanna, tartly; "she ain't come, nor she ain't likely to. And *I* ain't going to stand this sort of thing any longer, so I've adopted Walter out, and I'm going to do the same by Helen. I'm going away to live, myself, and I can't be bothered with a pack of children."

"Where's Wally?" eagerly questioned Reuben, who had grown fond of the lovely, deserted little ones.

"That's neither here nor there," said Joanna, stiffly. "He's got a good home, and that's enough. The question is, now, what is to become of the girl?"

Reuben had seated himself on the doorstep with Helen on his knee, and was surreptitiously regaling her with barley drops, while Miss Joanna stood in the wood-yard with arms akimbo and face flushed with her walk.

"Reuben Hallowell," said she, insinuatingly, "don't *you* want her?"

Honest Reuben nearly dropped Helen off his knee at the start he gave.

"I?" said he. "Good land o' Goshen, what would Almiry say?"

"She's a pretty child enough," said Joanna; "and she's real fond o' you, Reuben, and always was."

"Bless her dear little heart!" said Reuben, stroking down the mangy velvet cap with a loving hand, "so she is."

"And Mrs. Hallowell couldn't help liking her, now could she?" urged Joanna.

"Nobody could," said Reuben, emphatically, as he thrust another crystal of sugared sweetness into Helen's wide-open mouth.

"And she'd 'liven up the house wonderful, wouldn't she?"

"Ah!" uttered Reuben, with a groan. "Pretty dear! I only wish she was mine!"

"She might be, if you chose to make her so," said Miss Joanna, artfully. "Just fancy how cheerful it would be to have her runnin' to meet you every time you came in from the lots."

Reuben's eyes sparkled.

"I declare," said he, "I've a mind to try it. Tell me, Nell, would you like to stay here, along o' me, for good and all?"

Helen smiled uncomprehendingly up into his face; but Reuben Hallowell accepted it as an affirmative.

"Then, by jingo! you shall," said he, slapping his hand upon his thigh. "We'll try the experiment, any way; won't we, Nell?"

"Shall I leave her here now?" said Joanna, who was furtively watching the changing expression of his face. "I suppose it's as well now as any time."

"Yes," said Reuben, bravely.

Reuben carried the child in, set her up in a chair by the table, and gave her the dinner-bell and two or three clothespins to play with, and stood looking at her with a sense of admiring proprietorship and delight which would have afforded an artist the idea for an excellent picture.

"I swan to gracious!" he said to himself, "she is like Dolly! Dolly's poor little deserted child! God help her! she's as bad as an orphan! And if only Almiry takes a fancy to her we can be as snug as anything here. Can't we, Nell?"

But, almost in the same second, he started and looked around nervously, for the sound of old Bonny's well-known tramp on the causeway dissipated all his dreams of independence. Almira was coming back—and with her were returning chains and fetters.

She came in presently, rubbing her hands.

"Miller wasn't to home," said she, "so I told— Mercy on us! who's *this*?"

She turned sharply upon the child sitting at the table. Little Helen, frightened by the abruptness of the action, put up her lip and began to cry.

"Don't fret, chickie," said Reuben, patting her head. "Why, it's little Nell, wife—don't you remember little Nell?"

"Dora Beck's child?"

"Yes," confessed Reuben. "Dora Beck's child."

"And what—in the name of goodness—is Dora Beck's child doing here?" demanded Mrs. Hollowell, in accents of exasperation.

"I've adopted her," said Reuben, flinging himself head foremost upon the horns of the dilemma.

"You've—adopted—her?" repeated Mrs. Hollowell, apparently unable to believe her own ears.

"Yes," nodded Reuben, wiping the beads of sweat from his brow. "You see, Almiry, Miss Joanna's goin' away, and—"

"You've adopted her, have you?" said Mrs. Hollowell, grimly. "Then I'll *un*-adopt her. Do you suppose, Reuben Hollowell, that I'm going to have Dora Beck's children around here under-foot? If you do you're *ve*-ry much mistaken."

As she spoke, she was tying on poor Helen's hood and cape, and in another minute she had lifted her into the farm-wagon, which was not yet detached from the horse, and climbed up beside her.

"Almiry," cried out the discomfited husband, "where are you going?"

"I'm going to take this child back to Joanna Beck again," said Mrs. Hollowell, speaking as if every word were an exploding powder-cracker.

"Yes; but, Almiry—"

The rest of the sentence was lost in the rattle of the ancient wheels, as Mrs. Reuben Hollowell clattered at a Jehu-like pace out of the barn-yard into the road.

And when Miss Joanna Beck reached home she found the Hollowell equipage waiting opposite the green-painted front door, with Mrs. Reuben sitting as straight as a board, and poor little Helen crouched on the floor of the wagon, looking up at her as a fascinated wren might stare at a rattlesnake. She came dubiously to the gate.

"Oh! you're here, are you?" said the redoubtable Almira.

"Here's your young 'un. Lift her down, quick! 'cause I'm in a hurry."

"I thought Reuben wanted to adopt her," said Joanna, faintly.

"I don't!" said Mrs. Hallowell; "and that's more to the purpose. And the next time you want to get rid of your orphans, Joanna Beck, don't bring 'em to *my* house."

And she drove away, with the blissful consciousness that she had routed her old enemy, horse and foot.

Little Helen, cold and frightened, began to cry piteously. Miss Beck mechanically took her by the shoulder and led her into the house.

"Here," said she, sharply, setting a bowl of bread and milk before her. "Eat—and drink, and don't be all day about it, for I've another journey to take before night with you."

For Miss Joanna had decided that, since Mrs. Reuben Hallowell so resolutely declined the child, there was no other refuge left for her than the poor-house.

Mrs. Minkley, the matron of the poor-house, was just sitting down to her evening cup of tea, when Miss Beck was announced at the door. Now it so chanced that Mrs. Minkley and Joanna Beck had worked side by side in a New England corset factory nearly twenty years ago, and the plump matron at once recognized her old companion.

"Sit down, Joanna, sit down and have a cup of tea," said she, hospitably. "Betsy Briggs"—to the toothless old woman who stood grinning and mouthing in the door-way—"bring some more hot toast. And I s'pose you're married, and this is your dear little girl," chuckling Helen good-humoredly under the chin.

"No, I ain't married," said Miss Beck, tartly, "and this ain't my little girl, dear or otherwise. It's a deserted child—my sister's, Mrs. Minkley, between you and me, as I'm forced to bring here, not having no other home for her."

"You don't mean to say you're bringing her here to leave in the house?" said Mrs. Minkley, in open-mouthed surprise.

"Yes, I am," nodded Joanna. "Poor folks can't be choosers, Mrs. Minkley, and I'm driven to this in spite of my wishes."

"Poor, pretty little dear," said Mrs. Minkley, looking compassionately at Helen, who stood, half asleep, holding on to Miss Joanna's cotton-gloved finger. "Did you say she was your *sister's* child?"

Miss Beck nodded silently.

"The--pretty sister's?"

"Folks called Theodora good-looking," said the spinster, rigidly.

"Dear, dear, what a pity!" said Mrs. Minkley, inferring all sorts of sad possibilities from Miss Joanna's lugubrious tones. "Well, this is a strange world, ain't it? But drink your cup of tea, Joanna. And here's a seed cookey for the child. Poor little dear, she looks clean dragged out. How old is she?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Miss Joanna. "Two years old, or thereabouts, I calculate."

"She's large for two years," said the matron, patting the drooping curly head. "And what did you tell me her name was?"

"Helen Beck."

"Beck?"

The matron looked on inquiringly.

"Branchley, her father's name was," grudgingly admitted Joanna. "But it won't never do her any good."

"Where is he now?"

"Nobody knows," said Joanna, mysteriously.

"Her mother was--married to him, I suppose?" hazarded Mrs. Minkley.

"I suppose so," said Joanna, sourly.

"Then why don't you put it so?" said Mrs. Minkley. "I shall register her as Helen Beck Branchley. The Board will meet to-morrow, and in the meantime I can make her up a bed in the children's ward, by Silly Gertrude. Silly Gertrude is always good to little children."

And that night Sir Basil Branchley's little daughter slept under the roof of the poor-house, with Silly Gertrude chanting monotonous songs at her side, and the matron's coarse plaid shawl laid over her for a coverlid. For they were scant of bedding at the poor-house, and this year's Board had a mania on the subject of economy.

Miss Joanna Beck went back to the dreary old house under the poplars, much elated at the success of her diplomacy.

She called at the village to negotiate a sale of her rickety old furniture to a second-hand dealer, bequeathed the good will of her laundressing business to the second-hand dealer's wife, who was a rival of her own in a small way, and then went home and packed up her few belongings, herself carrying the box as far as the railway station. And then she left the key of the door under the left-hand corner of the door-stone.

"It won't be so easy for folks to track me now," chuckled

Miss Joanna to herself, as she sat in the train, speeding away to the far North. "Dora and Dora's children may look out for themselves now."

CHAPTER XXI.

"HE IS SO CHANGED!"

"He is so changed!" sighed Lady Branchley.

She stood by one of the boudoir windows, looking sadly out upon the quadrangle of the court, where a cool fountain was playing in the dusk of the April evening, and a solitary figure paced to and fro, with the fiery spark of a cigar-end marking his whereabouts.

Lady Augusta Trente rose from her piano and went to the casement also, leaning one hand lightly on Lady Branchley's shoulder.

"Yes," said she, slowly, "he is changed."

"So full of life and spirits once," said Lady Branchley; "so *distract* and silent now. Nothing interests him; nothing attracts his attention for more than a few minutes at a time. Even the sale of the Vendale property, which would once have roused him into the eagerest excitement and interest, fails to move him now. 'Let Julian look after it,' he said, when Angevine told him of the sale. 'It matters little to me who buys in the old property.'"

"Yes," assented Lady Augusta, "it is very, very sad."

"It's like a spell—an evil charm!" cried out Lady Branchley, clasping her hands. And, throwing a shawl around her shoulders, she went out into the soft twilight.

"Basil!" said she, gently.

The young baronet started at the sound of her voice; she put her arm lightly through his.

"Basil," said she, "of what are you thinking? Will you not share your sorrows with your mother?"

He smiled bitterly.

"I can hardly expect you to sympathize much with me, mother," said he.

"Why not, my son?"

"I was thinking of my wife."

Lady Branchley could not repress a slight shudder.

"Oh, my boy," said she, "what would I not give if that episode of your life could be erased from the past! Oh, that wretched American trip—what a harvest of sorrow it has caused us all!"

"I can not agree with you there, mother," said Sir Basil,

coldly. "For me that episode of my life, as you call it, is dearest and most precious of all its record!"

"Basil!"

"I am speaking from my heart, mother," he said. "And I may as well confess to you at once that I am very uneasy about my wife."

"Because she does not write?"

"Because she does not write. And I think I shall go back to the United States for her."

"Is that necessary, Basil?"

"I have written to her twice, mother; I have received no answer whatsoever."

"Perhaps she has never received your letters," hazarded Lady Branchley.

And Lady Augusta Trente, who from the open window could hear every word that was uttered, shrunk back behind the draperies with a guilty flush upon her cheek. For *she* knew—none better—what had become of the loving, pleading letters that had never reached Sir Basil Branchley's American wife.

"That is hardly within the limits of possibility, mother," said Sir Basil. "One letter might have miscarried—but not two."

"Basil"—Lady Branchley looked intently up into his face—"has it never occurred to your mind that—that—this wild, impulsive creature of whom you tell me may have ceased to care for a husband who is so widely separated from her?"

A deeper flush still burned on Lady Augusta Trente's face, as she sat silently behind the curtains, and she listened intently for the answer that came so quickly:

"You do not know her, mother!"

"Then why does she take no notice of your letters?"

He knitted his brows darkly, remembering Dora's thousand freaks and caprices.

"Mother," said he, "I have not done wisely in leaving her by herself—a mere child in all the ways of the world, a novice in its simplest customs. I have been still more to blame in not returning instantly to America for her—and all that now remains to me is to go immediately to her."

"Basil! And leave me in the first bitterness of my grief!" wailed Lady Branchley.

"She is my wife, mother."

"But surely—surely she can come to you."

"I have waited long enough for that—too long!" cried Sir Basil, passionately.

“Can not Julian go?”

“She might hide herself away from him in girlish terror; she might resent the interference of any stranger in our domestic affairs,” said Sir Basil Branchley. “She is as sensitive as any *Æolian* harp. I tell you, mother, that I, and none else, must go to her. I wish to Heaven that I had yielded to her entreaties and brought her with me when I came; but I dreaded the long and necessarily hurried journey for her and the children.”

Lady Branchley’s eyes softened.

“The children!” repeated she. “*Your* children, Basil! Oh! how I should like to see them!”

Lady Augusta Trente looked questioningly up in Lady Branchley’s face as she re-entered the drawing-room, in which the old butler had just placed lights.

“Is he going back to America?” she asked.

Lady Branchley nodded.

“After that uncouth farmer’s daughter, whom he has been mad enough to marry!”

“What else can he do, Augusta?” pleaded the mother, half terrified at the bitterness of the young beauty’s words. “She is his wife—the mother of his children.”

“A girl of the same grade as our dairy-maids,” cried Lady Augusta. “A creature who, by his own admission, can scarcely read or write.”

“Augusta!”

“There can be no doubt but that she has already consoled herself with some other admirer,” went on Lady Augusta, passionately. “Why does Basil not leave her in the woods where he found her, and avail himself of the good offices of the Divorce Court?”

Lady Branchley looked at her adopted daughter in a sort of terror. Lady Augusta began to perceive that she had gone too far and checked herself with a forced laugh.

“I can not speak calmly on the subject,” said she, “for I feel so deeply. All this must be such a disappointment for you, dear Lady Branchley, after all your soaring hopes and aspirations. But, of course, we must make the best of it now.”

“Yes, we must make the best of it,” sighed poor Lady Branchley; for Basil had been her favorite child, and it seemed to her as if his future were shrouded in clouds and darkness. With her aristocratic birth and tendencies, her son’s rash marriage with this humbly born American girl seemed little short of ruin.

The wild honeysuckles were just hanging their garlands of pink bloom over the woods of Ballston, when Sir Basil Branchley's arrival was registered in one of the hotels. He took a carriage and drove at once to Eaglescliff Hall.

The front of the house was all shut up, the closed blinds seeming to stare at him like the sightless orbs of a blind man. He rang at the door-bell, and the sound of the peal, echoing through the silent rooms, came back to him like a mocking cry; and still it never occurred to him that the house was deserted.

He rang again, and in a minute or two a blear-eyed old woman, with a huge key in her hand, came trudging up from the direction of the boat-house.

"Is it to look at the house you're wanting?" said she, shading her eyes from the intense May sunshine with one wrinkled hand. "Is it a permit from the agent you've got?"

"I want to see Lady—I mean Mrs. Branchley," said Sir Basil, impatiently. "Where are all the servants? Why don't some one come to the door?"

"What's your will?" demanded the old woman, with the other hand back of her ear.

"Mrs.—Branch—ley!" shouted Sir Basil. "*Is—she—at home?*"

"Mrs. Branchley."

"The lady who lives here," explained Sir Basil, beginning to think that his interlocutor was absolutely idiotic.

"There don't no lady live here," said the old woman; "the house is empty, and it's stood empty for six months."

Sir Basil's heart sunk within him.

"Where has Mrs. Branchley gone?" he asked.

"Don't know," said the old woman, indifferently. "Me and my niece, we lives in the basement, and takes care of the house. We're strangers hereabouts. But, Mr. Beetles, sir—the agent at Ballston—he can may be tell you what your a-wantin' to find out. *I don't know nothing about none of the folks as ever lived here.*"

And she burrowed back into some subterranean hole under the building, leaving Sir Basil standing on the steps, with a deadly chill at his heart, although the bland May sunshine wrapped him around as with a mantle.

He re-entered his hired hack, and drove back to Ballston. Mr. Beetles, the agent, greeted him with the respect due to a man who had always paid his rent promptly and without question. Mrs. Branchley! oh, yes! Mrs. Branchley had returned him the key in November last; he could not be quite certain

about the date, but knew it was past the middle of the month. Mrs. Branchley had gone away, leaving her address with no one but the gardener, who was to forward her letters and notes. Where was the gardener? Mr. Beetles was very sorry, but the man was dead. Had died of typhoid fever, in January. Had Mr. Beetles any idea where tidings of Mrs. Branchley could be gained? No, Mr. Beetles had not.

Sir Basil went straight to the railway station and took a ticket for Saratoga.

"The most natural thing in the world," said he to himself. "Of course, she has got lonely and homesick, poor little darling, and gone back to her old home. — I only wonder I never thought of that before."

And as the train steamed along his heart began to rise with elasticity from beneath the dead weight which had hitherto bowed it down like lead.

Dora had pointed out to him the old farm-house in the first days of her exultant bridehood, as they drove along the bowery roads in the direction of Saratoga Lake.

"Does it seem as if I had ever lived in that horrid old place?" she had exclaimed, radiantly. And Sir Basil had looked around with a smile at the ragged old poplar-trees, and the wilderness of dusty lilac bushes that surrounded the unpainted wooden house, and had forgotten it the next moment.

He recognized it, however, with a curious unpleasant thrill through his veins, as he called to the driver of the railway hack to stop.

"This is the place," said he; "Miss Beck's."

"All right, sir," said the man, scrambling down from his seat, and beating a vigorous tattoo on the shrunk panels of the door with the butt-end of his whip. He stopped a second or two to listen, and then repeated the mimic cannonade.

"I'll make 'em hear," said he; "or I'll know the reason why!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SEARCH.

SIR BASIL BRANCHLEY sprung out of the carriage and listened with the intensest eagerness.

"Knock again," said he, and the man thundered away on the door yet a third time; but there was no more answer than had returned itself from the deserted rooms of Eaglescliffe Hall.

"I'm blessed if I don't believe the house is empty!" said the man, desisting at last, with a puzzled face.

"Impossible!" said Sir Basil, impatiently. "Go around to the back of the house.

The man plunged through the tall weeds which had already sprung up at the side of the house, and made his way around to the back door. Presently he returned, shaking his head.

"Empty as Mother Hubbard's cupboard, sir," said he.

"Have you knocked?"

"Pounded my knuckles off, sir," answered the man, looking dolorously at his hands. "And then I loosed one of the window fastenings with the blade of my knife, and climbed in. House all empty, sir, and not a creetur there but rats and mice."

Sir Basil Branchley's face had grown deathly pale as he stood leaning against the fence.

"P'r'aps the neighbors might know something about 'em," suggested the driver.

Sir Basil grasped eagerly at the idea.

"We will inquire," said he.

The woman who lived in the nearest farm-house came out at the summons of the hackman, a slender, freckled little woman, in a faded calico dress, and arms steaming from the wash-tub which she had just left.

"Was it Miss Joanna Beck you was inquiring after, sir?" said she. "She's moved. Gone away somewhere to the North."

"But she must have left an address," said Sir Basil, eagerly.

"She didn't, sir," said the woman. "Miss Joanna never did things like other folks. She went away in the night, quite sudden like."

"Did—did her sister go with her?" Sir Basil spoke the words as if they pained him.

"The married sister, do you mean, sir? Dora, as married the rich Englishman?"

Sir Basil inclined his head with unconscious hauteur.

"Oh, no. *She* ran away long ago!"

"Ran away?" Sir Basil's firm, white teeth met with a grinding sound.

"Hadn't yer heard?" said the woman, taking up a year-old child which had toddled out after her, and was now pulling at her skirts. "Oh, yes, it was in the winter some time. She went away quite unexpected like, and left the children on Miss Joanna's hands."

"Where did she go?" asked Sir Basil, feeling as if the whole world were drifting away from beneath his feet.

"We don't know, sir," said the woman, with the vulgar enjoyment which the lower classes invariably derive from the imparting of unpleasant news. "Nobody knows, not even Miss Joanna."

"Has she left *no* trace behind?" cried out the young husband.

"No, sir, none," the woman volubly made answer; "and the neighbors, sir, they think it was to be rid of the children as she went. Miss Joanna was in a pretty taking when she found out they was left on her hands."

"And the children?" questioned Sir Basil, as he leaned, deathly pale, against the porch, "where are they?"

"The little boy, sir—Walter, they called him—disappeared all of a sudden. I asked Miss Joanna what had become of him, and she wouldn't answer me nothin', except that he was provided for. And Nell, sir, she's in the poor-house."

"*What!*" Sir Basil recoiled as if some envenomed arrow had struck him to the heart.

"Yes, sir, sure enough—in the poor-house," said the woman. "And a nice, pretty little girl as ever was. And it does seem to me as if Joanna Beck might have tried to keep her own sister's child off from the town poor. But the Becks always was half heathen."

"Where can I find this place?" asked Sir Basil, in a low, unnaturally sounding voice.

"The poor-house?" repeated the woman, who had no strained ideas of delicacy as to the repetition of the word. "It ain't so very far from here. Just down the road a mile or so, then turn off at McCormick's cross-roads, where the paper-mill was burned down last February, and it ain't but a little ways. Any one can direct you."

And so, with a sinking heart, Sir Basil Branchley once more drove away in the direction indicated by the freckle-faced woman.

"My God!" he exclaimed, aloud, as he leaned back in the carriage and closed his eyes, once more alone, "is this reality? or is it a horrible dream? Was my wife indeed in terrible earnest when she vowed to me, with glittering eyes, that I should never see her again? Has she carried out her scheme of vengeance in this appallingly systematic manner, by deserting me, and scattering her helpless little children on the face of the earth? As there is a Heaven above us, I swear I will never forgive her for this!"

For Sir Basil Branchley never for an instant doubted that Joanna Beck had been nothing more than an agent in Theodora's diabolical plans. The words which the young wife had uttered in the first glow of her unreasoning anger at Eaglescliffe Hall came back to her husband's memory, freighted with terrible meaning, and hardened his heart against her, like a wall of adamant.

He sat with clinched hands and eyes staring in front of him, as the lovely May landscape flitted past the carriage window, a perpetually shifting panorama of greening woods, meadows all spangled with buttercups and daisies, and lines of clustering alders that marked the winding course of tiny brooks. For all the notice he took of it, it might have been snow-covered glaciers, or tropical forests of Brazil. For Sir Basil Branchley saw only the face of his young wife as she uttered the fatal words: "You will never see me again." Like the writing of sympathetic ink, it had lain invisible in his memory all these months, to confront him now with terrible meaning.

It might have been an hour, or it might have been fifteen minutes—Sir Basil Branchley took no note of time—that elapsed before the hack drew up in front of a long, low building of rough red stone, from which a coat of stucco was peeling off in blotches. Not a tree or shrub cast its halo of refreshing coolness over the hard-baked ground—not a spear of grass carpeted the slope upon which the poor-house stood, but the brilliant sunshine of the spring day seemed to draw out and magnify every defect. At the rear of the house two or three women were beating a carpet, and a very old man sat on a bench in the sunshine, half asleep, with his chin resting on a wooden cane.

"Eh!" said he, looking up with dim eyes at the sound of the hackman's noisy greeting. "Speak a little louder, master, please; I'm a little hard of hearing. P'r'aps, if you've any business, you'd better go in and ask for Mrs. Minkley. She's the matron, Mrs. Minkley is."

And, having uttered this speech in a shrill, high-pitched voice, the old man settled forward again upon the head of his cane, and seemed to lose himself in a sort of waking trance.

By this time, a frowzy-haired little girl who had seen the carriage stop at the door had run to telegraph the news to Mrs. Minkley, who was superintending the mixing of a huge kettle of kalsomine, in the scullery back of the kitchen; for the spring house-cleaning was in full tide of progress at the poor-house, and Mrs. Minkley was in her element.

"Carriage company?" said Mrs. Minkley, hurriedly letting

down the skirts of her dress, and adjusting her black net cap. "And I looking like old Sancho! Louisy Jane, run and open the reception-room windows, and tell the company I'll be in directly."

Sir Basil Branchley was walking up and down the little musty-smelling room in an agony of impatience when Mrs. Minkley courtesied herself in.

"Are you the matron of this place?" asked he, turning around upon her, with an abruptness that startled her, as she afterward remarked, "e'en-a-most into one of her fits of palpitations."

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Minkley, laying her hand upon her heart, and secretly wondering at the princely height of the stranger and his manner of calm authority.

"In that case, you can tell me whether there is a child here named Helen Branchley."

"To be sure there is, sir," said Mrs. Minkley, forgetting all about "the palpitations" in her awakening interest; "the dearest, sweetest, prettiest little—"

"She is my daughter!" said Sir Basil, abruptly. "Let me see her at once."

"I—I'm sure I beg pardon," fluttered Mrs. Minkley, "but Miss Joanna Beck, as was the person she was left here by, told me as her parents had both—"

She stopped here, scarcely daring, under the keen light of Sir Basil Branchley's eye, to utter the word that was trembling upon her lip. But the young Englishman's slow, languid tones filled up the hiatus at once.

"Deserted her," said he. "You were told falsely, good woman. It is her mother only that has deserted her!"

"Poor lamb!" cried Mrs. Minkley. "But you needn't be afeard but what she's had the best of care and treatment here."

"Take me to her at once," said Sir Basil.

"I'll send for her directly," said Mrs. Minkley, courtesying, and smoothing down the stiff folds of her newly starched apron. "She's out in the medder with Silly Gertrude. Louisy Ja—a—ane!"

"I will go to her," said Sir Basil, imperiously.

"Dear me, sir; to think that you should take the trouble!" fluttered the matron. "But it's only a step or so, just this way. If you'll please to excuse the scrubbing-women and the week's wash, as had ought to be out long ago, if all these women wasn't out of their heads on account of its bein' house-cleanin' time!"

And, with a curious sensation as if he were walking in a dream and knew exactly what was to happen next, Sir Basil Branchley followed the matron of the poor-house across a dreary back yard, where one had to pick one's footsteps circumspectly to avoid the various pitfalls of wash-tubs, step-ladders and scrubbing-pails, into an expanse of green meadow, ordinarily used as a bleaching ground, which sloped down to a shallow stream, beside which sat two curiously incongruous figures—Silly Gertrude, a great overgrown girl of fifteen or sixteen, in a blue-checked apron and hob-nailed shoes; a girl with a vacant, good-humored face and reddish hair, shaved close to her head—and little Helen, her golden curls blown into tangles by the fresh wind, her cheeks dyed with infantile roses, and her dark-brown eyes, so like her mother's, glittering with happy excitement as she flung pebbles into the water, laughing out aloud as each one splashed into the smooth surface and made itself a circle of radiant rings, ever widening toward the shore.

"One, two, three! Look, Gerty, look," cried out Helen, clapping her baby hands in an ecstasy of glee. Silly Gertrude turned her head, with an idiotic smile, and went on with the monotonous lay of "Cruel Barbara Allen," which she was humming in a dreary, high-pitched sing-song.

Sir Basil Branchley paused on the crest of the hill, his heart seeming to stand still in his bosom at sight of the lovely, golden-haired apparition, which was a miniature copy of beautiful Dora herself; and at the same instant little Helen looked up and saw him.

With a frightened cry she flew to Silly Gertrude, who clasped her in her arms, and looked around defiantly, as if she were prepared to dare all dangers in her baby-charge's behalf.

"Go away," said Silly Gertrude. "There sha'n't nobody touch *my* gal."

"Gertrude, behave yourself," said Mrs. Minkley, sharply. "Put down that child. Who do you suppose wants to harm her? Nelly, my dear, come here."

Silly Gertrude obeyed reluctantly enough. Little Helen stood, clinging to the skirts of the blue-checked apron, with one finger in her rosy mouth, while she surveyed the stranger dubiously from beneath her knitted eyebrows. Alas! how often Sir Basil had seen that very look in Dora's face when she was momentarily startled or displeased. It cut him to the heart, like the stab of a tiny dagger.

"Helen," he said, gently, extending both his hands. "My little one—my baby! will you come to me?"

But Helen only buried her face in Silly Gertrude's apron, and began to cry.

"I might have known it," said Sir Basil, recoiling, with a pale face and set lips. "My very flesh and blood turns from me."

"Dear heart, sir, there's no occasion to fret," said Mrs. Minkley, as she drew the child forward. "She's only a baby, sir, and you're strange-like to her, just at first. She'll get used to you directly."

The matron was a true prophet. In less than fifteen minutes little Helen was sitting on her father's knee, rapturously playing with his watch-chain, and chattering forth a score of unintelligible baby sentences, and when the carriage rolled away, she was happy with a rag doll manufactured out of the scantest possible materials by Silly Gertrude. And that young person herself was crying most sonorously, with her head muffled in the back-kitchen towel.

"The only child as we've had here for a year!" whimpered Silly Gertrude. "And she to be took away just as we was a-gettin' used to her. Boo—hoo—hoo! I wish I didn't belong to the poor-house!"

Sir Basil Branchley took his newly recovered treasure back to Saratoga, where he engaged a nurse for her behoof, and ordered a wardrobe with the most reckless disregard of details.

"Give me everything that a child requires, more or less," said he. "I shall want to take her across the Atlantic in a few days."

And Mme. Severini smilingly declared that all should be ready without delay.

Helen was left at the Clarendon Hotel, in charge of Agnes, the new nurse, while Sir Basil Branchley telegraphed to New York for a special detective, and spent hours in arranging every possible scheme by which his lost child, Walter, could be traced.

The detective looked grave but hopeful.

"It ain't an easy job, sir," said he, "but it can be done."

"It *must* be done," said Sir Basil Branchley. "I tell you, man, this lost child is my only son!"

"We'll do our best, sir," said the man. But as he sat mutely penciling down the various odds and ends of information that he deemed of the chiefest importance, he glanced up ever and anon from under his bent brows at Sir Basil and wondered how it was that he received no instructions on the subject of the child's missing mother.

“For she was my fine gentleman’s wife,” he pondered, “just as much as this little fellow was her son! Oh, well, well—it don’t do to inquire too closely into these things. There’s little jars in all families!”

While Sir Basil Branchley, sitting opposite with folded arms and a face like granite, was trying to shut out of his heart and mind the pleading sweetness of Dora’s large, limpid eyes, the well-remembered music of her laughing voice.

“She has deserted me,” he repeated to himself. “She has cast the past utterly behind her. She has separated me, perhaps forever, from one of my children! She has done her best to deprive me of the other. May God forgive her, for I never can!”

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT SOUTHAMPTON.

THE sea-fogs were hanging drearily over the crowded spires of Southampton when Sir Basil Branchley landed with the dark-eyed little child which was all that remained to him of the brief, bright episode of his American life. The air was raw and chill, the mists drooped over the harbor like a great lead-colored pall, and Agnes, the nurse-maid, shuddered involuntarily as, with her little charge in her arms, she took her first step on English soil. A wandering violinist on the docks was playing “Home again, home again, from a foreign shore;” while a sweet-faced woman by his side sung the words at the top of her shrill soprano voice; and as Sir Basil went by, he flung them a coin.

“Home!” he muttered bitterly to himself; “I wonder if I shall ever know the meaning of the word again.”

Little Helen looked around with large, wondering eyes; to her everything was new and delightful. Sir Basil put her and her nurse in charge of the motherly landlady at the Princess of Wales Hotel, who had once been housekeeper in the Branchley family.

“Take good care of them, Mrs. Weldon,” said he. “I shall probably go on to London in the evening train, and from thence to Monmouthshire to-morrow.”

Mrs. Weldon was all smiles as she ushered the pale, tired-looking nurse and the little laughing child into a cozy private parlor where a sea-coal fire was burning, and the deep red curtains seemed to shut out the rain and mist of the streets, and officiously helped to remove Helen’s wrappings.

“The little darling!” said she; “what cherry cheeks she

has, to be sure! So you've just landed off the steamer, my good girl?"

"Yes," said Agnes, who was kneeling on the hearth-rug, busy with the buttons of the child's glove.

"And I suppose as this little lady is some friend's child as Sir Basil has took charge of?" added Mrs. Weldon.

Agnes looked up in surprise. "It's Sir Basil's own little daughter, ma'am," said she, "from America."

Mrs. Weldon fairly started back in amazement. "Sir Basil's own daughter?" echoed she. "Bless my soul! Seems to me I *did* hear something about his being married to an American lady, and then I didn't hear nothing more and concluded it was all a mistake. Sir Basil's own daughter! Bless her dear little heart, I must have a kiss;" stooping down to the child's rosy face. "And not a look in her face like him."

"They're not alike," said Agnes, primly.

"She's like her mother, I suppose?" said Mrs. Weldon, interrogatively.

"I suppose so," said Agnes.

"I suppose my lady will be here in a few minutes?" said Mrs. Weldon.

"Who?" said Agnes, looking quickly up.

"My Lady Branchley."

"No, ma'am," said Agnes, pursing up her lips. "At least I don't expect she will."

Mrs. Weldon opened her eyes very wide indeed.

"No?" said she. "Then, if I might make bold to ask—where is my Lady Branchley?"

"I don't know, ma'am," said Agnes. "Nobody knows."

Mrs. Weldon staggered back.

"Dear, dear!" cried she, "she ain't never—left him!"

"We don't know," said Agnes, looking very mysterious.

"I never saw my lady, but folks do say as she was only a farmer's daughter, at Saratoga. I know there's some kind of a secret search a-goin' on, and I know there was a little boy as she took with her, to spite Sir Basil—that's what people say."

"The son and heir!" cried Mrs. Weldon, clasping her hands. "Oh, dear, dear, how dreadful!"

"But Sir Basil ain't best pleased for folks to talk of it," added Agnes.

"Naturally," nodded Mrs. Weldon.

"And it's as much as my place is worth to mention the subject," went on the girl, "so if you please, ma'am, you'll regard this as quite private and confidential between us."

"Oh, certainly, certainly," said Mrs. Weldon, who was completely bewildered by the magnitude and startling nature of the news that she had just heard. "And now that my dear little lady's dropping off to sleep, so snug and comfortable like, I'll just ring for a bit of hot toast and a cup of tea, and we'll talk it all over, ma'am, you and I! Dear, dear, to think of such a thing happening in the Branchley family, and they as proud as Lucifer! And Sir Basil the haughtiest of them all! Dear me, dear me!"

While his domestic affairs were thus being freely canvassed by the ex-housekeeper and Miss Agnes, in the little private parlor of the Princess of Wales Hotel, Sir Basil Branchley himself was walking moodily through the streets of Southampton. He had been directed by Mr. Newcombe, the New York detective officer, to put himself in communication with one Moses Medill, a worthy who resided in one of the back streets of the seaport town, with a tin sign emblazoned: "Solicitor at Law" fastened in front of his door. But in truth and in fact, Mr. Moses Medill did very little "soliciting at law." He was a pale, flabby man, with a double chin, a smooth-shaven face, and small black eyes, who sat all day at a high desk, making entries in a big clasped book, eating sandwiches out of a tin box, and drinking sherry by secret gulps out of a flat wicker flask. People went and came to that house, but to all appearances Mr. Moses Medill never crossed the threshold. And if his neighbors had been told that he was one of the keenest and best-informed detectives in England, they would probably have laughed in the informant's face.

He glanced at Sir Basil's card without a gleam of intelligence in his dull, heavy countenance.

"It's all right, Sir Basil," said he, thrusting the sherry flask a little further under a pile of yellow papers as he spoke. "Newcombe has written to me."

"Not that I think it at all likely that the lady will visit England," began Sir Basil, "but—"

"I understand," said Mr. Medill, solemnly, "I understand. Things as is likely and ain't likely don't count for much with us. The main point is to be on the lookout, and not to lose time. Yes, Sir Basil, you may make your mind easy. I understand. It ain't necessary for you to trouble yourself with any more instructions."

And when the baronet went out Mr. Medill refreshed himself with a swallow out of the surreptitious sherry flask, and sat staring at the ceiling for full half an hour.

"He may be a very sagacious fellow," thought Sir Basil,

as he walked with swift, nervous footsteps down the street. "I am bound to suppose that he is, from what Newcombe has told me—but he certainly appears very like a fool!"

If Mr. Moses Medill could have known the meditations of his client, he would have smiled grimly. He had succeeded in making the very impression he desired to produce.

"*Hal—lo!*" called out a cheery voice, as Sir Basil walked on with preoccupied mind, and eyes that beheld nothing of the outer world. "Why, it's Branchley!"

And the baronet looked up to recognize the frank, cheery face of a man who had been his classmate at Oxford five years ago. His face brightened for a moment, in spite of the sad meditations from which he had been so abruptly roused.

"Anneslie," said he, "surely this is never *you*?"

"Why shouldn't it be me?" demanded the tall, good-humored looking man who had planted himself so directly in Sir Basil Branchley's path. "The wonder is that it should be *you*. Why, man alive, don't you know that I'm one of the surgeons in the hospital here. Didn't I write you all about it not a year ago?"

Sir Basil looked puzzled. He had never received the letter to which his old college-mate alluded. And yet he could not very well explain the various circumstances which had kept him from England.

"In the hospital here?" he repeated, vaguely.

Dr. Anneslie nodded.

"A fine institution," said he. "And I flatter myself I've succeeded in infusing a little new blood into the galvanized old corpse of medical respectability here. How much time have you? Wouldn't you like to go through the wards with me? There are some fine accident cases, and we've one or two very peculiar developments of fever, which—"

Sir Basil smiled at his friend's enthusiasm.

"Thanks," said he, "but it is quite impossible. I leave almost immediately; I have only arrived this morning from America—"

Dr. Anneslie rumbled up the crest of curly black hair which crowned his fine head like a mane.

"Pardon me," said he. "I *did* hear that you were married—to an American lady. Is Lady Branchley with you?"

Sir Basil shook his head; and there was an expression in his face which warned Dr. Anneslie to desist from asking further questions.

"Oh, by the way," said he, "one of those cases in the fever ward is an American—one of the sweetest faces I ever saw.

It's very strange how differently disease will develop itself in one of these magnificent transatlantic constitutions. If I ever get time, I'll write a pamphlet upon the influences of climate on pathology, hanged if I don't!"

"A very interesting subject," said Sir Basil, absently.

"You won't come in and look at my new system of ventilation, and the pretty American fever patient?" asked Dr. Anneslie, with a laugh. "I can take you there and back in an hour, and have plenty of time to go over the wards."

"Who, I?" said Sir Basil, raising himself with an effort out of his thoughts. "Thanks, no. I could not possibly spare the time."

"Well, good-bye," said the doctor, wringing his hand cordially, "I'm glad to have met you, at all events."

He jumped into his carriage, snatched the reins from the hands of his groom, and drove away at a rattling pace over the stony streets of Southampton.

"Look's like a ghost!" thought Dr. Anneslie. "I wonder what it is, any way, between himself and his wife. Poor fellow! to think that a life like that should be wrecked, all through a woman! It's a deucedly delicate subject, I suppose, but I *should* like to know the rights and wrongs of the whole affair. I used to like Branchley in the old days."

He was still musing upon the subject when they drew up in front of the great stone building, with its paved court and Elizabethan porch.

Dr. Anneslie, like most physicians, possessed the convenient art of regulating all his thoughts and meditations as if they were so many brown paper parcels, neatly done up and labeled. He could take one out of the storehouse of his brain at pleasure, and put it back again at any second he pleased, calling up its successor with magical promptness. And he put down Sir Basil Branchley's affairs as he crossed the paved court, and took up the fever cases with as intent an interest as if he had never thought of anything else.

He strode across the wide, airy hall, sprung up the stone stairs two at a time, exchanging pleasant words with the attendants and students as he passed, and plunged at once into the business of the day.

Like a glimpse of sunshine his cheery face came and went among the wards. He had a round red apple for the little child, No. 6, who had been run over by a cart, and a number of an illustrated weekly for the pale boy with the spine disease, who found the time hang so heavily on his hands. He stopped by the poor little woman in No. 18, who had heightened her

fever by fretting about the children at home, scolded her roundly first, and then told her that the Sisters of Mercy had sent a young woman to care for the little ones until such time as she, their proper guardian, should return.

"God bless you, sir!" said the widow, with tears in her eyes. And wherever Dr. Anneslie went the same benison followed him, with whispered fervor, "God bless you, sir."

He stepped with a lighter foot as he crossed the cleanly scrubbed corridor to the last ward, and entered a great airy room with whitewashed walls, rows of glittering windows, and lines of narrow iron bedsteads, separated by light wooden partitions.

"Well, nurse," said he to the mild-faced, elderly woman in the black stuff dress and white net cap, who rose to greet him, "and how is 45 to-day?"

"Well, sir, I should say she was a thought better," said the woman. "Not but what she's light-headed yet, and the fever ain't altogether gone, but still she's slept by spells, and took her cup of beef-tea like a lamb."

"Come, that's a good hearing," said the doctor, cheerily, as he advanced, and drawing aside the white curtains, above which hung a label in fat black letters, "No. 45," approached the light iron bedstead, upon which lay a small, fearfully attenuated figure, with large dark eyes shining out from cavern-like sockets, a deathly pale face, and close-shaven head. One tiny blue-veined hand, which was wasted until it bore a pitiful resemblance to the claw of a bird, lay on the coverlid—the other was restlessly groping about the bed as if for something which it could not find—a weary, ceaseless search.

And this poor white shadow, with its gleaming eyes and sunken cheeks, was all that remained of beautiful Theodora Branchley!

CHAPTER XXIV.

DORA'S LETTER.

DR. ANNESLIE laid his hand, with gentle authority, on the poor little wandering palm.

"My child," said he, "be quiet. You are tiring yourself out."

"Yes, I know," said she, staring vaguely at him. "But they have taken it away, and I can not find it."

"Taken what away?"

The nurse, who had been watching her, now came forward.

"I think, sir, as it must be her wedding-ring she means,"

said she, in a low tone to the doctor. "It dropped off her poor wasted finger, and I put it away."

"Do you hear, 45?" said the doctor, kindly. "It's all safe. Pomfret will give it to you when you are better."

The large, burning eyes were lifted to his face.

"But I want it *now*," said she.

"Bring it, Pomfret," said the doctor.

"It wouldn't stay on her finger, sir."

"Bring it, I say; I will fix it so that it will stay on her finger."

The nurse brought the golden circlet which Sir Basil Branchley had placed upon his bride's fair hand that bright day at Saratoga. The sick woman's eyes glittered at sight of it.

"Give it to me," said Dr. Anneslie. He wound it with silk twist, which he took from his instrument-case, and then slipped it on her finger.

"There," said he, "now you can keep it."

The faintest shadow of a smile seemed to flutter around her pale lips as she closed her eyes once again.

"She's very young to be a married woman, sir, isn't she?" said Mrs. Pomfret, as she smoothed the pillow and sprinkled a few drops of some fragrant aromatic disinfectant on the coverlid.

"There are young fools as well as old ones," said the doctor, brusquely. He stood a moment consulting his watch, with one finger pressed on the patient's pulse.

"Better," said he. "Decidedly better. Upon my word, Pomfret, I'm of opinion that she will pull through yet!"

Mrs. Pomfret was stirring a bowl of gruel over a hissing little spirit-lamp that afternoon, when a low, tremulous voice reached her ear—Dora Branchley's voice.

"Who are you?" said Dora, in the faint, fluttering accents of a frightened child. "Who are you?"

"Bless my soul!" said Mrs. Pomfret, turning around. "She's comin' back to her head again. Who am I, dear? Why, I'm Nurse Pomfret; and I've took care of you and tended you these many days!"

There was a momentary silence—the light of reason came back slowly, slowly, to poor Dora's weary brain. And then followed another question:

"What place is this?"

"It's St. Hilarius's Hospital, dearie," said Mrs. Pomfret, comfortably.

"And—and how came I here?"

"They brought you out of the steerage, dearie," said Mrs.

Pomfret, with the kindly consideration due to one of Dr. Anneslie's favorite cases—"the steerage of that nasty American steamer, as was chock-full of fever—and here you've laid, close to death's door, for two months."

Theodora lay quite still. She heard the words, and comprehended them as an abstract fact, but they made no especial impression upon her mind until that same evening, at dusk, when Mrs. Pomfret brought her a strengthening drink.

"Did you say—two months?" said she, lifting the great weird eyes to the nurse's face.

Mrs. Pomfret nodded her head. "And more," said she, "it was the colored stewardess brought you here—a good, kind soul as ever lived. She had to go back again the next trip, or, she declared, she'd have stayed and helped nurse you herself!"

Dora gave a low, shuddering cry.

"Two—months!" said she. "Then it is spring-time now?"

"Summer, my dear," said Mrs. Pomfret—"the last of June."

"I must get up and be dressed," said Dora, faintly. "Help me, please! Where are my things? And why have you wound my wedding-ring with silk?"

Mrs. Pomfret smiled serenely; she was used to the mad freaks of fever patients.

"There, there," said she, "lie still like a good child. Why, you couldn't walk a step if you tried! And your clothes would hang on you like a scarecrow, even if they wasn't sent to be disinfected long ago. You'll have some nice new ones before long, never fear. And as for your wedding-ring, it was the doctor himself wound it all with silk, so it shouldn't slip off your finger. Bless his kind heart!"

"What doctor?"

"Doctor Anneslie. He'll be here again to see you at one o'clock to-morrow."

And once more poor Dora closed her eyes, with past, future, and present seeming to flit like cloudy phantoms through her brain. She was too weak and weary even to think; the tired consciousness refused the draft upon its enfeebled powers, and she fell asleep, even while she was trying to comprehend where she was, and why she was there.

"Well, 45, and so you are all right now?" said Dr. Anneslie, briskly, as he came to her side the next day.

She smiled faintly; the large limpid eyes deepened with unexpressed emotion.

"Do you know," said he, cheerfully, "I claim great credit to myself for bringing you through the crisis of this fever?"

"I thank you very much, sir," said Dora, in a faltering voice. "If you had not taken pity on me, I must have died—and then—"

She paused—a choking fullness seemed to rise into her throat, as she thought of the lonely little children playing on the hearth-rug in front of Miss Joanna Beck's fire.

"And then you'd have been a deal better off, I don't doubt," said the doctor, lightly. "But you must be a good girl, and eat and drink as much as you can, so as to get strong."

"Yes," said Dora, with feverish eagerness. "I must get strong—I must get away from here."

"Why?" said Dr. Anneslie, with an amused look. "Are you tired of us already? Don't Pomfret treat you well?"

"Oh, yes, sir, yes!" cried Dora, "but—there are reasons!"

Dr. Anneslie looked earnestly at her. "Were you coming to this country for your husband?" said he.

The deep scarlet suffused Dora's thin face.

"Yes, sir," said she, in a low tone.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know, sir."

"A clear case of desertion," thought the doctor. "Poor child—perhaps it was a questionable kindness in me to keep her away from the gates of the grave? Well, it would be wicked to question her further."

And he added pleasantly:

"Well, keep up your spirits, my child; I dare say you'll find him!"

Dora looked piteously after him as he strode off to the other patients.

"He seems good and kind," thought she. "And he spoke very softly, as if he had known trouble himself. Oh, if I had a little more courage, I would tell him all. I would ask his advice."

But poor Dora was like the wounded fawn that hides its hurt from mortal eye. She could not bring herself to make a confidant of the kindly surgeon.

If she only had followed the impulse of her heart.

"Mrs. Pomfret," she said, timidly, the second day after her return to reason.

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Pomfret, with the kindly, caressing way which came so naturally from her genial temperament.

"Can you write?"

"Of course I can, my dear," said Mrs. Pomfret. "And read, too. I've had a tolerable education, though I says it as shouldn't say it."

"Will you write a letter for me? To a friend in America?"

"To be sure I will, dearie."

"Now?"

"If it's not to be too long," said Mrs. Pomfret, provisionally. "Because I can't have you tiring yourself out, you know, and getting a relapse, and all that sort of thing. The doctor wouldn't like it."

"Oh, no, no, dear Mrs. Pomfret, it shall not be long," said Dora. "Get some pen and paper, please. I have none of my own. I must be a suppliant for everything."

"Don't fret about that, dear; it's not much," said Mrs. Pomfret, kindly, as she produced the necessary implements from a table drawer near by. "Now begin. What shall I say?"

Dora closed her eyes and tried to think.

"Say *Dear Joanna*," said she.

"No date nor nothing?" said Mrs. Pomfret, biting the end of her pen.

"No; it isn't necessary. I shall write so soon again. *Dear Joanna!*"

"Well," nodded the nurse, "I've wrote that down."

"I have been very ill, but am better now. I—"

"Stop, stop, child!" cried Mrs. Pomfret. "I ain't a steam-engine, nor yet I ain't the Lightning Letter Writer. *I am better now!* There, go on."

"I have not seen him yet," dictated Dora, rather more moderately now; "but I shall soon, and I will send the money just as soon as I get it. For God's sake, Joanna, wait patiently, and be good to the children."

"Your sister,

"DORA."

"You want me to write Dora Bracy, don't you?" said Mrs. Pomfret.

"No," said Dora, coloring at the mention of the assumed name which she had borne in the steamer's books. "It is not necessary to sign any name but 'Dora.' She knows. Please to direct it 'Miss Joanna Beck, Saratoga, United States of America.' And if you will put a postage stamp on it, I will pay you when I get money from Ba——, from my husband. I had twenty dollars in my bag, but it was stolen from

me in the steerage. I think it was partly that which gave me the fever, for I cried so when I missed it, and my head ached so dreadfully, and there was such a shooting pain between my eyes, and then I can't remember anything more."

So Mrs. Pomfret directed the letter, and affixed the necessary stamp, and sent a little boy out to post it, with all haste.

"You'll feel better now, won't you?" said she, kindly.

"Oh! so much, *much* better," said Dora, with swimming eyes, and she pressed the wrinkled, horny hand of the good-natured nurse to her lips.

"I do declare," said Mrs. Pomfret, stroking down the forehead of the girl, "your hair is beginning to grown again—the least bit in the world."

"Is it?" said Dora, listlessly.

"I can tell you," said Mrs. Pomfret, speaking more with the idea of amusing her patient than from any set purpose, "it went to my heart to cut off those beautiful long curls o' yours. Such a rare gold color, too. I've seen hair of that color sold for five pound a switch when I was in the hair-dressing business with my brother's widow, before I came here."

Dora opened her eyes with sudden animation.

"My hair," she cried out. "Oh, Mrs. Pomfret—could I not sell it?"

"Mercy, no, child," cried the matron. "It was burned—along with your clothes. And if it hadn't been, why, it would ha' been against all rules to sell hair cut from the head of a hospital patient! Why, we should have had all the health commissioners down upon us in a lump."

"Did they—*burn* my clothes?" gasped Dora.

"To be sure, dearie. It's the regulation here. But you needn't look so scared. You'll be furnished with a decent suit when you leave here—there's a ladies' association sees to that, without its costing you a penny. And I looked through all the pockets myself and there was nothing of any value in 'em."

"There was a little chamois leather bag," began Dora, nervously.

"Around your neck? With papers in it? Oh," said the nurse, kindly, "that's quite safe. I took charge of it myself. If you had died" (how much as a matter of course she spoke the words which made poor Dora's heart stand still) "we should have broken the seal to find out where your friends lived. We often get a clew to people's belongings in that way."

Dora drew a long sigh of relief, for there was a little,

thread-like chain of gold in the bag, with a tiny cross at the end—a chain which Basil had given her, and which she had wound around the marriage certificate. It was of no great intrinsic value, but still she knew that it was worth something. It would at least enable her to reach Branchley Manor House, and then—

But the poor weary little brain could endure no further strain, and Mrs. Pomfret looked up in the middle of a long monologue, to perceive that her patient was soundly sleeping.

“Bless her poor heart,” said the good-natured nurse, “it will do her good.”

“Doctor Anneslie,” said Dora, the next day, when the surgeon came as usual to pay his daily visit, “how soon can I go away from here?”

“I don’t know,” said the doctor, intent upon the hurried throbbing of his patient’s unequal pulse. “Possibly in two weeks—or ten days, perhaps, if you make very good progress indeed.”

“Two weeks! Ten days!” repeated Dora, aghast; “oh, I *must* go sooner than that.”

“Child,” said the doctor, “there is no ‘must’ in a case like this; it is for you to thank Heaven that your life is spared to you at all, instead of trying to dictate to Providence.”

“I did not mean that, sir,” faltered Dora, with the quick tears springing to her eyes. “Only—only you do not know all.”

Dr. Anneslie sat down by the bedside, and placed his cool hand on the girl’s fevered forehead.

“Will you not tell me all?” said he. “You are very young to be friendless and alone! Don’t you think it would be advisable to take some one into your confidence?”

But Dora shrunk away like a frightened child.

“I could not, sir,” gasped she. “Please—please do not ask me. It is not my secret alone; it belongs to my husband.”

“He has not deserted you, then?”

“Oh, no, sir; no!” Dora’s eyes fairly flashed at the idea.

“Why does he not come to you?”

“He does not know,” faltered Dora.

“Will you not let me write to him?”

“Oh, no, not for the world!”

Dr. Anneslie shrugged his shoulders and rose again.

“Well,” said he, “we must not talk you into a headache. And, I suppose, a willful woman must have her own way—at least so the proverb says.”

And in spite of Dora's resolution to recover as rapidly as possible, it was full three weeks after the date of this conversation, when, dressed in a plain black dress from the *repertoire* of the "Ladies' Association," with her pale face half hidden under a coarse black hat, and the beloved chamois leather bag once more suspended by a ribbon around her neck, Dora Branchley bade the good nurse adieu.

"You are such a child to be going away by yourself," said Mrs. Pomfret, shaking her head; "and I don't believe you even know where you are going."

"Yes, I do," said Dora, trying to call a smile into her pale face; "I am going to find my husband—in Monmouthshire; and I am so grateful to you for the money you gave me for the little chain and cross."

The cab which Mrs. Pomfret had called and paid for, conveyed Dora to the railway station, and in another half hour she was steaming westward with her eyes intently fixed on the flying landscape, and her mind trying to project itself into the future. But she was still weak and powerless to reflect, except for a very few minutes at a time.

"I wish they had not cut off all my hair," thought Dora, recoiling, with a shudder, from the reflection of her changed face in a little slip of mirror above an opposite door. "And I am so pale, and my cheeks are so sunken. But *he* will love me still; *he* always loved me in spite of everything."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WAYSIDE TRAVELER.

THE intense glow of an August day had burned itself away in the deep orange sunset that turned the river into blood; the trees leaned, with stirless leaves, against the horizon, and a refreshing coolness was beginning to creep over the little hamlet of Branchley-upon-Usk. Here and there people sat on their steps enjoying the soft air; little groups were gathered at the corners, and everything bore an aspect of rest and relaxation after the heat and labor of the day. The evening train had swept through Branchley-upon-Usk, leaving its little ripple of incident and excitement; the mail had been brought up to the post-office and duly sorted out and distributed; and Mrs. Howglas, the landlord's wife, was leaning over the half door of the pretty little inn, with her knitting in her hand, as one of the village gossips went by.

"No company to-night, eh, Mrs. Howglas?" said Miss

Perkins, who was a milliner and dress-maker by trade, and had a little bay-window half-way up the main street, full of caps and bonnets and ribbon bows.

"Of course there's no company," said Mrs. Howglas, irritably. "How can one expect company, Miss Perkins? Times ain't as they used to be, when her majesty's mail-coach passed through Branchley-upon-Usk, and all the passengers stopped overnight at the Queen's Arms. Ah! them was the days to live in! And if it wasn't for tourists and London clerks down for their vacations, and artists, and that sort of people, me and Howglas might just as well put up our shutters at once, so we might."

Miss Perkins shook her head and sighed sympathetically.

"We're losing money, that's a fact," said Mrs. Howglas. "But Howglas's father and grandfather kept the place before him, and he's partial to it. We'd a-done a deal better somewhere else. No, young woman," irritably, as a slight figure moved languidly up to her in the twilight and paused as if to speak, "we've nothing to give—nothing at all."

The quick blood rushed to Dora Branchley's pale cheek. She drew herself up with in-born dignity.

"I think you misunderstand me, my good woman," said she; "I was not begging."

Mrs. Howglas turned quickly to look at the pallid face and slender figure to which she had not as yet deigned a glance.

"I beg your pardon, miss," said she. "What was it you was a axin' of? It's half dark, and my eyes isn't what they was, and there's such a many tramps around just now. Walk in, please, miss, and be seated?"

And Mrs. Howglas bustled to set a chair in her own little parlor, which boasted a red and green carpet and gilt-framed mirror, and opened from the bar by a white-curtained glass door.

"Am I far from Branchley Manor House?" asked Dora, sinking like one utterly exhausted, into the chair.

"Five miles, miss," said Mrs. Howglas; "by the straight road, or four miles and a half if so be as you goes over Ramsey Rock, and along the glen path by the precipice."

"Five miles!" echoed the weary traveler.

"You ain't a-goin' to faint, miss, be you?" said Mrs. Howglas, reaching instinctively for a glass of water.

Dora recovered herself with an effort.

"No," said she, almost inaudibly. "But five miles yet! And I thought I was there when the train left me at Branchley-upon-Usk."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Howglas, groping dimly, as it were, for facts. "Then you came by the train?"

Dora inclined her head.

"I didn't see you in the station omnibus when it went by," hazarded Mrs. Howglas.

"I walked," said Dora.

"That's a good quarter of a mile, of a hot evening," said Mrs. Howglas.

"I—I have not a great deal of money," confessed Dora. "I am obliged to economize where I can."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Howglas, the thermometer of her respects falling a great many degrees at once; "p'r'aps you was a-lookin' for a place up in the manor house. If so, I might as well tell you plainly as my step-daughter, Mary Anne, has the promise of the first situation as falls vacant."

Once more Dora drew herself slightly up, although she could hardly help smiling.

"You are mistaken again," said she. "I was *not* looking for a place."

Mrs. Howglas was evidently puzzled.

"P'r'aps you're a friend of Mrs. Birchall, the housekeeper," said she. "Mrs. Birchall is a very nice old lady, and one as I've knowed these twenty years. I'm often up to the manor house to tea, and once a year Mrs. Birchall and my lady's maid does me the honor to come here in a friendly way."

But Dora was paying no attention to the landlady's words; she had taken out her purse and was counting over its contents with feverish haste.

"How much would a conveyance to Branchley Manor House cost?" asked she, suddenly interrupting the tide of Mrs. Howglas's eloquence.

"We couldn't harness up under a crown," said Mrs. Howglas, stiffly.

"And how much is that?" said Dora, who was hardly as yet used to English current coinage.

"Five shillings," said Mrs. Howglas, knitting away by the light of the two tallow candles, which she had placed in brightly scoured brass sticks on the mantel, where they kept company with a plaster basket of highly colored fruit, a china dog, and a pair of conch shells.

"And how much would a bed cost here? a bed and a very, very plain supper? just bread and cheese," said Dora, wistfully.

"If you ain't pa'ticular as to the room—" began the landlady.

"Oh, I am not!" interposed Dora.

"Then we'll call it eighteen pence," said Mrs. Howglas; "and I can put you in one of the little chambers over the stable-yard, as is clean and neat, though the view ain't quite what I could wish it to be. Would you like your supper at once?"

"If you please," said Dora, rousing herself as from a reverie.

Mrs. Howglas spoke over the bar door to a buxom, red-armed maid-of-all-work, and presently a little japanned tray arrived, with two solid wedges of coarse bread, a knob of cheese, and a mug of foaming beer.

"I did not order beer," said Dora, looking up with a startled face.

"No," said Mrs. Howglas, kindly, "but you've a dreadful tired look, and a mug o' beer don't matter much either way in a house like the Queen's Arms. Drink it and welcome; it'll do you good."

"Thank you," said Dora, meekly, as she drank the frothing beverage, and felt it strengthen her weary nerves and sinking frame.

"So you're going to Branchley Manor House," said Mrs. Howglas, who was evidently in a garrulous mood, and had seated herself, with her knitting, in the open window.

"Yes." Dora was trying to eat the cross-grained bread and rank cheese, although she could hardly swallow them. But she was weak and faint, and felt the necessity of nourishment of whatever nature.

"They're a fine family," said Mrs. Howglas.

"Are they?" faltered Dora.

"Though my lady never has got back her old spirits since Sir Reginald's death," added Mrs. Howglas. "And one can't wonder at it, when one considers all the circumstances."

"What circumstances?" Dora looked up with a pale, fevered face.

"So sudden like, you know," said Mrs. Howglas. "And Sir Basil's wretched marriage."

"Marriage!"

"Hadn't you heard?" said Mrs. Howglas. "He got married, secret like, over in America, to a common working-girl as wasn't fit to mate with him. My lady's maid told me that her ladyship went into dreadful hysterics when she first heard of it, and no wonder, she as had always held up her head with the highest in the land."

Dora sat quite silent, bending over the tray, while Mrs.

Howglas talked on, delighted to have obtained so docile an auditor.

"And I do suppose Lady Augusta Trente was worse disappointed still," said she, "for they do say as she and Sir Basil were as good as engaged, and Lady Branchley loves her like a daughter. May be you've seen Lady Augusta?"

Dora shook her head.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Howglas. "*There's* a beauty for you. *There's* a lady as would have done credit to the name of Branchley. And may be she will yet, for Sir Basil was always fond of her, and they tell me as divorces is easy obtained in America. And there's one thing to be thankful for—Sir Basil left this foreign wife of his in her own country, and didn't bring her over to put his fine relatives to the blush."

"Indeed!" Dora's eyes were shining fitfully now; her face, erewhile so pale, was glowing scarlet. "And what has become of this poor girl—the wife, I mean?"

"Ah!" said Mrs. Howglas, "that I don't know. I dare say he's provided for her comfortably. The Branchleys were always a generous race. But I can't help thinking it would be a good thing for everybody if she was to die!"

Dora shuddered and clasped her hands nervously in her lap.

"Perhaps it would."

"Don't you see?" said Mrs. Howglas, triumphantly waving her disengaged knitting-needle in the air. "It would just unloose the whole tangle. Sir Basil could marry Lady Augusta, as is what the whole family has always looked forward to. My lady would be happy, and all that unlucky American business would be forgotten."

"But," pleaded Dora, in an agony of contending emotions, "perhaps—perhaps Sir Basil *loves* this poor forgotten girl?"

"It ain't likely," said Mrs. Howglas, rescuing her ball of cotton from the piratical grasp of a kitten. "There's some women, you see, that bewitches a man, and when they once gets out from under the spell, they themselves is the first to wonder at it. She must have been a reg'lar artful creetur to get him to marry her at all, for— But you ain't near through eating?"

"Yes," said Dora, rising. "Let me go to my room, please; I am very, very tired."

Mrs. Howglas took up a candle, and preceded the weary young traveler along a labyrinth of low-ceiled, cleanly soured little passages, terminating in a tiny room, which looked out upon the stables—a room whose furniture consisted of a nar-

row bed, covered by a patch-work quilt, a pine table, and one chair.

"It's small," said Mrs. Howglas, "but you'll find it neat and clean, ma'am."

The door was hardly closed behind the landlady's retreating footsteps, when Dora flung herself on her knees on the floor, with her face buried in the pillows of the bed.

"Is it true?" she asked herself, wildly. "Is it all *real*? Does he wish me dead? Am I a blight and a blur on his life? Oh, my husband, my Basil, has it come to this?"

The moon rose up, golden and beaming, and looked pitifully down on the young wife as she knelt there, struggling with her own heart. The soft summer air touched her burning forehead, and a night-bird in the trees without uttered a low, hoarse shriek, like a note of warning.

In all the agonies and tribulation through which she had passed, Dora had known no pangs like this. In all her doubts and vague uncertainties, she had firmly believed in the one rock and refuge of her husband's love. But now—now it was as if all the moorings of her life had broken loose, and the poor little drifting bark was nearing the great ocean of despair.

"But I *will* know," she said to herself. "I will not suffer doubt like this to gnaw my heart out, without sufficient reason."

She rose and looked out at the moonlight beauty of the night.

"Five miles!" she said to herself, "five miles! I can easily walk it, if I go slowly and stop to rest between whiles. I am stronger since I drank the beer that good woman gave me, and eat the bread. And it will be a much easier journey at night than in the burning heat of day."

She laved her face and hands in the small tin wash-basin which represented the toilet service of the apartment—ah! how cool and delicious the water felt—and dried them on a lavender-smelling towel of homespun linen that hung on a nail beside the table.

"I feel better now," she murmured, and folding once more around her shoulders the light shawl which she had thrown aside, and extinguishing the dim candle which burned on the shelf, she crept softly out into the narrow entry, and down the creaking stairs to the first door that seemed to promise egress into the air.

It chanced to open into a thriving vegetable garden, whose rows of currant and gooseberry bushes skirted the very high-

road, and hurrying along with quick, nervous footsteps, Dora found herself presently in the dew-sprinkled footpath which wound its sinuous way in a parallel line with the dusty road.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“SO NEAR, AND YET SO FAR.”

SHE paused and glanced irresolutely up and down the broad thoroughfare, uncertain which direction to take. Presently, however, a barefooted lad came shuffling along through the dust with a basket on his arm, and whistling as he trudged.

“Which is the way to the manor house—Branchley Manor House?” she ventured to ask.

The lad stopped whistling and stared at her.

“There ain’t but one manor house hereabouts,” said he; “and that lays right afore you to the north. It’s a straight road, and you can’t miss it.”

Slowly and languidly Dora moved along in the direction indicated by the boy’s pointed finger, now crossing a broad space of glimmering moonshine, now losing herself in deep shade, and ever and anon sitting down on a stone or a grassy slope, or friendly stile by the way-side, to rest; for it was but a day or two, be it remembered, since she had been discharged from the wards of St. Hilarius’s Hospital at Southampton, and she was still weak and feverish, with limbs that trembled under her, and a brain through which wild unconnected fancies chased each other with bewildering succession.

“Let what happen will,” she told herself, moodily, “I have enough money to take me back to Southampton—and Doctor Annèsle will tell me what to do to get home to Joanna and the children. The children! For oh, thank God, they are mine still, and no one can take them from me!”

And she smiled in the golden moonlight as she remembered Walter and little Nelly at home.

The great lodge gates of Branchley Manor House were fastened and padlocked for the night, and the lights were all out in the lodge windows. For an instant or less Dora stood irresolute, but then, remembering the wild and semi-savage habits of her girlhood, she slunk along into the dense shadows where an ornamental vine garlanded the wall, and climbing up the mass of rough stone work like a cat, she dropped lightly on the other side.

And in this guise, Dora, Lady Branchley, entered the fair domains of her inheritance.

The moon shone softly on the broad expanse of gleaming gravel walks, the stars and crescents, and circles of brilliant-blossomed flowers, and the velvety surfaces of close-shorn lawn, as Dora hurried along, keeping as much as possible in the shadow, and starting nervously now and then as a white marble statue gleamed through the trees like a ghost rising up before her, or the uncertain light transformed the misty sparkle of falling fountains into the likeness of a phantom robe.

Until, at last, the old house itself came in view, garlanded with rank sheets of ivy, and shadowed by great beeches and spreading linden-trees. Dora stood still, with a vague sensation of awe, and looked up at the red glow of the illuminated casements.

“It is like a king’s palace,” the unsophisticated American girl murmured under her breath. “It *is* a palace—and my Basil is the king! And I—oh, I am not the queen—I am only a poor beggar girl, standing out in the cold dew and the silence. Oh, if some one would only open the gate and let me in! *He* wouldn’t come to bid me welcome to-day, not even if he knew I was standing shivering here. He has ceased to care for me!”

Poor Theodora! if she could only have known that at that very moment Sir Basil was thinking of her with a great, tender longing at his heart; if she could have been made aware of that long, weary search across the Atlantic, which had resulted so unfavorably! She stood there, chilled and trembling in the night dew and shadows without; he sat, alone and sad, in his study, and there was but one narrow wall between them. If he had spoken the word “Dora!” she would have heard his voice, and come sobbing and quivering to his heart; if she had cried out, he would have started up and answered her. And yet to all intents and purposes a gulf wider than the rush of foaming leaves parted their hearts. “So near, and yet so far”—ah, poor, poor Dora! Ah, wretched Basil, sitting all alone, in the somber splendors of thy lonely home!

An instant she stood with drooping head and clasped hands, in the very stream of light that shone out from the solitary lamp beside which her husband was keeping vigil, but the fluttering folds of the Swiss curtains and the intertwining ivy leaves hid him from her view—only one instant, and then, moving slow and noiselessly, she glided along under the shining casements, until she came to the low bay-window that opened from Lady Branchley’s own drawing-room. And,

attracted by the sound of voices, she paused, and parting the clustering vines, looked in.

Never in all her life had Dora seen so exquisite and tastefully arranged an apartment as this same drawing-room of Lady Branchley's, with the light of myriad wax candles softly reflected from the yellow satin draperies and cornices of snow and gold, the clusters of hot-house roses piled in gilded baskets, and the dainty *marqueterie* tables, heaped with books and music, and implements of feminine work. Lady Branchley herself sat in a low shell-shaped easy-chair of white satin, corded and tasseled with gold, with a book in her hand—at her Dora gazed long and intently.

“How haughty she looks!” thought poor Dora. “How cold and proud. Oh! I never, never can call *her* mother!”

Just then the golden satin folds that hid an opposite door were lightly lifted, and a tall, beautiful girl, with jetty hair coiled around her head and transfixed by a diamond arrow, came in—a dark-eyed, southern-browed young beauty, with lovely long eyelashes, and cheeks glowing vividly, like the rich bloom of a pomegranate, while the white muslin dress she wore was edged with creamy lace, and dotted here and there with tiny bouquets of deep crimson roses. A wide sash of fringed crimson silk was looped carelessly around her slender waist, and bands of dead gold encircled her round, white arms.

At the sight, Dora shrunk back as if a serpent had stung her, and clasped both hands over her heart; she knew, as if by intuition, who it was.

Lady Augusta Trente came forward with a smile.

“Dear, have you been lonely?” she said. “I would have come before, but I had all that copying to do. *He* is so absorbed in it.”

Lady Branchley smiled lovingly—Dora no longer thought her cold and impassable—and drew the low satin chair close to her side, as Lady Augusta sunk gracefully into it.

“I must learn to give you up, dearest,” said she; “and I must school myself not to be jealous of my own son. When you are his wife, dear—”

But poor, tortured Dora lingered to hear no more. With a low, suppressed cry of anguish, she darted away, and lost herself in the glossy wilderness of laurel and rhododendron shrubberies. Lady Augusta looked up.

“What is that?” said she.

“A night-bird, was it not?” Lady Branchley answered carelessly.

"It sounded like a human voice," said Lady Augusta, parting the filmy lace draperies and looking out.

"My darling girl, you are getting nervous," said Lady Branchley, with a smile.

And Theodora, pausing once more at the foot of the leafy beech avenue, through whose green arcade the lighted windows of the old manor house shone so cheerily, wrung her cold hands and shivered as if she were deadly chilled in the sultry summer air.

"It is God's judgment on me," she wailed aloud. "I flung his love away when it was all my own; now I am left to perish with heart-sickness. But, at least," she added to herself, as she looked around upon the fair domain, "my poor little deserted children have rights which shall be recognized. For myself, I care not what becomes of me, but my boy shall yet be the heir of Branchley."

And when Mrs. Howglas, who was always the earliest astir in her own house, came down to unbar the side door that led into the vegetable-garden, she uttered a shriek.

"What's the matter, my dear?" said Mr. Howglas, who was yawning in the newly opened bar.

"It's that young woman as came by train last night!" screamed his spouse, "and was a-inquirin' about the manor house."

"What of her?" demanded Mr. Howglas, who was always rather slow at imbibing sudden impressions.

"Why, she's here!" said Mrs. Howglas, "in a dead faint among the mint and peppergrass by the door, here!"

It was quite true. Theodora had lain all night where she had fallen worn and exhausted in the heavy dew of the previous midnight. The long walk had completely exhausted her little stock of strength, and the torture of mind which she had undergone completed the work. And as she came slowly back to consciousness, she looked wildly into Mrs. Howglas's troubled gray orbs.

"Oh!" said she, "I remember now. It is the village inn; and you are the landlady."

"My dear," said Mrs. Howglas, infinitely relieved to hear her speak in accents of reason and composure, yet much perplexed nevertheless; "won't you tell us who your friends are?"

Dora looked at her for a moment, and then burst into a short, mocking laugh.

"My *friends*!" said she. "I have no friends. Do I look like a person that has friends?"

Mrs. Howglas turned to her husband, who stood leaning against the door, scratching his head.

"Howglas," said she, "I'll tell you what I think I had better do; I'll send a note up to Mrs. Birchall, at the manor house. My lady is always most kind in cases of—"

But Dora had struggled into a sitting posture, and was feeling wildly around for her shawl.

"No!" cried she; "you shall not. I am no object of charity to your domineering Lady Branchleys. Give me my things and let me go on my way."

"But where would you go, dearie?" soothed Mrs. Howglas, who began to entertain dim fears that her guest was not quite in her right mind.

"To Southampton," Dora answered.

"Have you friends there?"

"I told you I had *no* friends," reiterated Dora, sharply; "but there are people there who will help me; and I have money enough left to take me there, if once I could reach the railway station."

Mrs. Howglas turned abruptly to her husband.

"Howglas," said she, "tell 'em to harness up the one-horse chaise at once. I'll drive her over to the station at once, or we shall miss the train."

For Mrs. Howglas was in mortal fear lest she should be left with a sick stranger on her hands for an indefinite period of time.

"And I ain't altogether sure as she's quite right in her head," said Mrs. Howglas confidentially to her husband, as she went out to put on her beaver driving gloves. "If there's any one as belongs to her in Southampton, the sooner she gets to 'em the better; that's my opinion."

"And mine, too," said Mr. Howglas, dryly.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BACK TO THE HOSPITAL.

"I DON'T know when I've been so tired," said Dr. Anneslie, wearily.

It had been a trying day at St. Hilarius's Hospital. The patients there were beginning to suffer from the long-continued and fervid heats of summer; the weaker ones were dropping out of the world as dead leaves drift quietly from the trees; and those who were fortunate enough to possess more recuperative power had grown fretful and irritable in propor-

tion. The accident cases turned and tossed in their especial ward; the fever patients in their own isolated building, counted the slow tickings of the clock, and tormented the attendants by ceaseless questions and complaints; and the convalescents were lest tractable of all.

"To be sure, sir, it's a wearing business," assented Mrs. Pomfret, who had been promoted to the more satisfactory position of "matron," and now stood with her pencil and little leather-covered memorandum-book, in which latter she had been jotting down the surgeon's various orders. "And of all thankless creeturs, I do think—"

At that moment a little serving-maid, in the brown stuff gown and white muslin cap of the hospital brigade, tripped into the room in noiseless carpet slippers.

"If you please, Mrs. Pomfret, ma'am, is the doctor here?" said she, dropping a courtesy.

"Is the doctor here?" repeated Mrs. Pomfret. "Why, Betsey Jane, don't you see him yourself?"

Betsey Jane acknowledged this piece of information by a second series of courtesies.

"Please, ma'am, it's what I was told to ask," said she, scarcely daring to lift up her eyes in the august presence of the hospital physician. "And if he is in—"

"Of course he's in," sharply interposed the matron.

"Yes'm," courtesied Betsey Jane. "But it's what I was told to say."

"For charity's sake, Mrs. Pomfret," said the doctor, "let her tell her story her own way."

"Go on, Betsey Jane," said Mrs. Pomfret, resignedly.

"Yes'm," said Betsey Jane. "There's a young person in the reception-room axin' to see him, ma'am."

"A woman, Betsey Jane?"

"A lady, ma'am, I think."

Dr. Anneslie looked down upon the little white-capped maid with a comical curl of his lip.

"Child," said he, "where do you draw the dividing line?"

"Sir?" fluttered Betsey Jane.

"What makes you think this person is a 'lady,' and not a 'woman?'"

"If you please, sir," said Betsey Jane, nervously plaiting the border of her apron, "she speaks so soft and clear like, and she wears a black shawl!"

"Oh!" said Dr. Anneslie, smiling. "Well, Betsey Jane, you may go and tell this person in the black shawl that I'll be down presently."

"Please to excuse her, sir," said Mrs. Pomfret, as Betsey Jane dropped a parting courtesy and disappeared. "She means well, but she ain't bright."

"She is a very nice little girl," said Dr. Anneslie; "and she has a fair idea of character. Well, Pomfret, you'll be very particular about the bromide of potassium for No. 18, and see that they don't let 65 have too many of those quieting powders. And if there are any signs of inflammation setting in around that broken ankle in 43, let Mr. Jenks know at once. In such weather as this, it won't do to run any risks."

"Certainly, sir," said Mrs. Pomfret. And Dr. Anneslie ran down the cool stone stairs three steps at a time, and strode into the reception-room, a high-ceilinged, uninviting-looking apartment, with its floor covered with checked matting, and chairs set stiffly around the wall, while a big round table, containing a "Visitors' Register," occupied its center. As he entered, a slight figure in black, which had been leaning out of the window, rose up and advanced.

"Doctor Anneslie," said Dora.

"Why, it is No. 45!" exclaimed the good-natured physician. "Mrs. Bracy, the name was, wasn't it?"

And he took the little cold hand in his, with a friendly warmth of greeting which was inexpressibly grateful to the poor solitary wanderer upon the face of the earth.

"Yes, doctor," said Dora, with a faint smile, "it is I."

Dr. Anneslie looked scrutinizingly at her, and shook his head.

"You don't look quite as strong as Samson yet," said he. "Well, how about the husband? Did you find him?"

Dora's face crimsoned. Her eyes involuntarily shrunk from the doctor's questioning glance.

"No," she answered, almost inaudibly; "I did not find him. But, doctor, I have come to ask your help and advice. Please, please do not turn away from me, for I have no friend in all the world but you."

"What kind of help?" said the doctor, who was, alas! but too well used to this sort of piteous appeal; "and what sort of advice? No, my poor child, you need not fear that I shall turn from you."

"I want to get back to America," said Dora, lifting her large, pleading eyes to the doctor's face.

"To America?" Dr. Anneslie fluttered the leaves of the "Visitors' Register" in surprise. "But why don't you stay here? I might perhaps, in time, get you a place as nurse, or assistant, or something, in the hospital here."

"I *must* get back to America," cried Dora, wildly. "I must! Oh, doctor, please help me to get back home, in some way, no matter how hard or humble!"

Dr. Anneslie looked at her in some surprise and doubt. He had seen too many cases of sad domestic dissensions in his hospital experience to have supposed that Dora Bracy would find the husband of whom she professed to be in search; nay, there were times in which he doubted the existence of the husband altogether. But there could be no question as to the intensity of her eager longing to get back once more to her native land.

"I know the officers of the 'Royal Beatrice,'" said he, after a minute or two of thought, "and I might get you a chance to work your passage across, if—"

"Oh, doctor, I should be so glad—so thankful!"

"My good girl," said Dr. Anneslie, imperatively, "will you hear me through? I said *if* you were willing to take some very humble and menial part in the stewardess's department."

"I would scrub floors!" cried out Dora, "and be grateful for the opportunity to do it."

Dr. Anneslie smiled. "I do not think they will ask you to do that," said he. "However, the 'Royal Beatrice' is in port now; she will probably sail in a day or two, and I will see Mr. Bonfill, the purser, at once. Where are you lodging?"

Dora colored and hesitated. "After all," said she, "why should I be ashamed to confess that I have no home? I came directly from the railway station here."

"Have you had any breakfast?" the doctor demanded, brusquely.

"No, sir," confessed Dora, in a low voice, "except some crackers that a lady left on the seat in the railway depot."

Dr. Anneslie rang the bell. "Pomfret," said he to the matron, "here is No. 45 come back to us. Give her some tea and toast, and a poached egg, and find some hemming or something for her to do for a day or two."

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Pomfret, smiling a kindly welcome to poor Dora. And so Dr. Anneslie hurried away, glancing at his watch as he went.

The great front door of St. Hilarius's Hospital had hardly clanged behind Dr. Anneslie when Dora burst into tears.

"Don't cry, my dear," said Mrs. Pomfret, "but come along with me, that's a good girl."

"I don't know what I have done to deserve such kindness as this," sobbed poor Dora.

"It ain't we, child," said the matron; "it's the doctor."

And if ever there was a Good Samaritan, it's he, and that's morally certain."

Dr. Anneslie came back the next morning in high spirits.

"I've found a berth for you, 45," said he. "Assistant stewardess in the 'Royal Beatrice' to wait on the seasick ladies and children, make yourself generally useful, and see to the table-linen."

"I can do that," cried Dora, joyfully, "because—"

"Well?" The doctor looked keenly at her as she paused with downcast eyes and burning cheeks.

"Because," added Dora, "we used to do a deal of fine washing and ironing at home, my sister and I. And so I'm used to it."

For it never occurred to Dora to be ashamed of the humble origin from which she had sprung.

"All the better for you now," said the doctor, laughing at Mrs. Pomfret's face of dismay. "Get your things on and be all ready by the time I am through my rounds upstairs. The 'Royal Beatrice' sails at noon to-morrow, and you must be on board to-day. Come, Pomfret, I shall want you with the prescription-book."

"So she's only a working-woman, after all," said Mrs. Pomfret, as she followed Dr. Anneslie into the first ward.

"Did you take her for a princess in disguise?" said the doctor, laughing.

"Well, no, sir, not quite that," said Mrs. Pomfret, rather discomfited at his tone of satire; "but she had such a great many genteel ways with her that I made sure she was a reduced lady."

"There are different styles of lady in this world, Pomfret," said the doctor. "And it is my opinion that our little brown-eyed American belongs to the guild, in spite of the washing and ironing question. Now let me have the ward-book, and we'll begin our day's work."

And when Dr. Anneslie had gone the round of the hospital patients, he took Dora Bracy into his brougham and rattled off down to the docks with her, studying his pocket tablets upon the way.

Dora looked timidly at him as the carriage whirled along, and wondered if he was always so busy and preoccupied.

"He has no time to think and brood and wear his heart out," thought she. "Oh, if I were only a man, with my heart and hands full! Oh, why does Heaven make women so weak, and then lay such heavy burdens upon them?"

Miss Brydges, the stewardess of the "Royal Beatrice," was

a brisk, wiry woman, very tall and very thin, with a tongue that wagged incessantly, a queer little way of biting off the ends of her sentences, and sharp black eyes that seemed to take in everything at once. She surveyed Dora rather doubtfully when the purser's clerk brought her down to the little round room like an illuminated well, where she was engaged in marking towels. The young American was pale and shrinking, and her eyelashes were still wet with tears, for she had just bidden kind Dr. Anneslie adieu. Miss Brydges looked hard at Dora; Dora stood regarding the inlaid wooden floor through a mist of tears.

"Here she is, Miss Brydges," said the purser's clerk, who was in a hurry to get back to his own department.

"Why, it's only a child!" said Miss Brydges, disdainfully.

"I am a married woman," said Dora, with all the dignity she could muster.

"*You!*" snorted Miss Brydges.

"Yes, *I*," said Dora.

"Where's your husband, then?" said the stewardess, tartly. Dora lifted her large dark eyes to her face.

"I don't think you have any right to ask," said she. Miss Brydges burst out laughing.

"No more I have," said she. "You're right there, child. But you *do* look young. Sit down and take off your things, and I'll give you these towels to sort over and distribute, until the next basket of linen comes in."

For Miss Brydges had a generous stratum through her nature, and liked Dora Bracy none the less for her defiant retort. And during the sea voyage that ensued, Dora had many a reason to like and respect the tall and venom-tongued old lady.

"Good-bye, my dear," said Miss Brydges, as they parted on the fore-deck of the "Royal Beatrice." "If you can't find your friends—"

"Oh, but I shall," interrupted Dora, with a startled look. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Things don't always turn out just exactly as we expect 'em," said Miss Brydges, oracularly. "Or if anything happens, or you find yourself in trouble, come to the office of the Imperial Mail Steamship Company, and ask for me, and the 'Royal Beatrice!'"

"Thanks," said Dora, wistfully, "you are very kind, but it isn't likely that I shall come back here, for I am going to my children, you know."

"Poor little birdie," thought Miss Brydges, looking after the slight, girlish form, as it threaded its slow way among the

bales and packages and piled-up trunks on the pier. "Her children, indeed—and she such a baby herself! The Lord have mercy on the whole lot of 'em, that's all I've got to say!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GONE.

THE fitful and uncertain light of the September moon was shining through racks of cloud upon the old farm-house on the Saratoga road; the moaning wind of the early autumn rustled the leaves of the gaunt old poplar-trees, and everything bore a dreary and deserted appearance, as Theodora Branchley toiled with slow and weary footsteps up the old familiar path. Her slender funds had barely sufficed to pay her fare by the cheapest method of travel between New York and Saratoga; she had sat up all night, in the close and confined atmosphere of the ladies' cabin of the steamboat, because she could not spare the additional fifty cents which were necessary to secure a berth, and breakfasted off two or three sour baker's rolls and a cup of very indifferent coffee at a stand in Albany, on the way to the Rensselaer and Saratoga depot. She had just missed the morning train because she had walked, instead of riding in the street cars from boat landing to railroad station, and had sat all day counting the minutes with heartsick eagerness, until the afternoon train steamed out. She had looked, alas! how wistfully, at the delicious red-cheeked peaches and fragrant grapes which are brought through the train by boy-venders, but had been compelled to make her dinner off half a pound of crackers—and when at last they reached Saratoga, she had got off the cars with a sick, dizzy feeling, which was partly induced by loss of sleep, and partly by insufficient food. But Dora took no thought of herself—she was thinking of her children—the little ones she had not seen in so many long months—as she walked hurriedly along.

"They'll remember me, of course," she said to herself, smiling in the gray, uncertain twilight. "They couldn't forget me in so little a while. Walter will spring up and clap his plump hands and cry out 'Mamma, mamma!' and Nell will sit on the floor and look up with those great wondering eyes of hers, until she comprehends who it really is, and then how she will laugh and shower kisses all over my face! Joanna will scold, of course, because I have sent no money, but I can easily explain matters to Joanna."

And so, all along the dreary, tedious way, poor little Dora

beguiled the time by fond anticipations of the meeting with her little ones. She had looked forward to it for so long; she had pondered on it night and day; she had dreamed of it when she was tossing in the solitary midnight watches on the great green waves of the Atlantic; and, now that it was so close at hand, she felt the pulses of her heart stop, the blood stand still in her veins.

The night was chilly, with a restless wind, whose cooling balm touched Dora's face ever and anon, yet she paused to wipe the beads of perspiration away from her forehead, as she came in sight of the old farm-house. And with a sudden pang of fear she took note of the ominous circumstance that there were no lights in the windows, and that all the lower shutters were closed and barred.

"It is just like Joanna," said Dora, with a nervous laugh. "She always did grudge the expense of candles. But I dare say she is at the back of the house. And the children will be in bed; but I must wake them up to feel their little clinging arms around my neck just once before I sleep."

She lifted the rusted iron latch of the gate and went in; the weeds, grown even taller and more rank than when Sir Basil Branchley's charioteer made his way through their bush wildernesses, reached almost to her shoulders as she attempted to make her way around to the back of the house.

"How careless Joanna is!" she thought, impatiently. "We never used to let the weeds grow so high as this. I must turn out with the shears to-morrow and cut them down."

She hurried to the back door, where a half-dead honeysuckle vine hung down from its fastenings, and tapped with a sepulchral sound against the shutterless windows. There was no light here neither. Dora pressed her hot face against the panes of glass to look into the kitchen.

All was solitary and deserted. The faint reflection of the uncertain moonlight lay in trembling squares on the bare board floor; the dark shadows lurked in all the corners like black palls, and a deadly chill struck to Dora's heart.

"The house is empty!" she cried aloud. "Oh, kind Heaven! they are gone away!"

For a moment she stood quite still, her white face turned up toward the moonlight, which just then streamed radiantly through a rift in the gray masses of cloud, her hands clasped above her head. And then suddenly remembering the old habits of her childhood, she stooped down and searched eagerly under a crevice of the door-stone for the key of the kitchen

door, which was invariably left there when Joanna was absent from the house. It was just possible that it might be there still.

As her fingers groped about in the darkness, something clinked with a metallic sound against the stones—the key itself! Snatching it eagerly up, she fitted it with tremulous fingers into its wards. It was rusted with long disuse, but she succeeded in moving the lock with it, and pushed the door open.

“Joanna!” she called out, with beating heart, as she stood still in the midst of the desolate kitchen; “Joanna!”

But only the sound of her own voice returned to her, like a mocking echo.

She hurried up the creaking wooden stairs and into the dismantled chambers above. In the room which she and her little ones had occupied, the moon was shining spectrally and an owl, disturbed in its lurking-place, flew past her with a hideous shriek, and escaped through a broken pane of glass.

Dora fell on her knees in the middle of the floor, with her face buried in her hands.

“Am I dreaming?” she muttered, in a voice which sounded strangely hollow in her own ears. “Is this a hideous nightmare? Oh, no, no! It is too true—too terribly real! She is gone; she has taken my little ones away, and I know not where to find them.”

She stood a minute with one hand pressed over her burning forehead, striving to collect her scattered thoughts.

“Reuben will know where she is,” she said aloud. “Of course she will have told Reuben. How silly of me not to have thought of it before. Perhaps she has moved into the village, to be nearer her customers. Perhaps she had a good opportunity to sell the old place—and here I am, terrifying myself into a fever over the merest trifle in the world.”

She laughed hysterically—and the owl, that had taken refuge in the pines at the back of the house, answered with an eldritch cry. Involuntarily she shuddered and grew pale.

“I will go to Reuben,” she said, folding her scanty shawl across her bosom. “He will tell me. Reuben Hallowell was always kind to me.”

Once more she crept down the stairs, scarcely daring to look behind her, for the old childhood’s terror of some gray, gliding form close behind her seemed to have taken possession of her all of a sudden: the very rustle of her dress on the worn wooden ledges seemed to check her heart beats, and the resonant clang of the closing door struck a thrill of superstitious

terror through her frame. And she almost ran through the door-yard, where the tall weeds waved to and fro in the night wind, and a starved cat darted across her path, with green, gleaming eyes, and a tail of portentous size.

Once safe without the dilapidated picket fence, and she breathed more freely. Two miles further, in her present state of exhaustion and fatigue, was no slight distance; but she never thought of her own weariness as she hurried on, locking wistfully up at the one or two lighted houses that she passed.

"I will go to Reuben," she kept repeating to herself. "Reuben will know!"

As she at length approached the Hallowell farm-house, a cheery red light streamed out across the hedge of lilac bushes under the kitchen window.

"They are at home," she thought. "I am glad of that!"

She knocked softly at the door—and after a minute or two, during which she could hear the sound of footsteps move to and fro in the interior of the house, a candle flame was seen to gleam through the fan-lights of the door, and the bolts and bars are drawn back with a grating sound. And then the door was opened about an inch, and Mrs. Reuben Hallowell's sharp face, illumined after a Rembrandtesque fashion by her dip-candle, became visible.

"Hey?" barked out Mrs. Hallowell. "Who's there? And what's wantin', at this time o' night?"

"How do you do, Mrs. Hallowell?" said Dora, trying to smile. "Is Reuben at home?"

Mrs. Hallowell projected her face an inch or two further toward the porch, and held the candle a little higher up.

"Oh!" she said, suddenly, recoiling. "It's Theodora! Well, I *am* surprised!"

"Yes," said Dora, "it is I. Where's your husband?"

"Where's *yours*?" retorted the virago, making no motion to open the door for the admission of her unwelcome visitor.

Dora shrunk back as from the prick of a dagger.

"He is in England," said she, faintly. "At least, I suppose so. But I would rather not talk about him."

"Humph!" said Mrs. Hallowell, "I wasn't aware as you was too good to be asked any questions."

"Is Reuben at home?" ventured Dora, once more.

"No, he ain't," said Mrs. Hallowell, curtly.

"Do you think he will soon be back?"

"I can't say," said Mrs. Hallowell.

Dora shivered as the chill night wind fluttered the fringes of her shawl, and made the candle flame flicker and flare.

"I think that I will come in and wait," said she. "I dare say he will not be long."

"No, you won't, Mrs. Branchley," said Mrs. Hallowell, the end of her nose becoming very red, and her pale eyes scintillating fire; "I hope you won't take it uncivil, but if it's all the same to you, I don't care to have no grass widows about my place, more especially grass widows as was known to be sweet upon my husband afore he was married to me. I dare say as it's all very right for you to be runnin' away and leavin' your children for your sister to take care of, and then runnin' back again just when the fancy takes you—it may be foreign manners, but it don't suit me! So if you'll please to excuse me, p'r'aps you'd better go elsewhere."

And without further ceremony, she shut the door in poor frightened Dora's face, sliding in the bolts and turning the creaking locks with very unnecessary noise.

Dora turned away, vaguely terrified and sick at heart. What had she done to be thus insulted and scorned, and shut out from all the common civilities of life? And what did Reuben Hallowell's sharp-tongued wife mean by that allusion of hers to Dora's leaving her children?

She hastened down the road scarcely knowing whither she was going, her only idea being to place as wide a distance as possible between herself and the cold, cruel woman who had dared thus to speak to her. And as she entered the deep shadows of a lonely pine glen which skirted the road for a little distance, she ran against a man.

"Take care!" said a deep, but not unkindly voice. "Folks as goes along without lookin' afore 'em generally runs up against snags, afore they gets through."

"Reuben!" cried out Dora, with a curious commingling of sob and laugh in her throat. "Oh, Reuben—is it you?"

"My senses alive!" ejaculated Reuben Hallowell. "Why, it *can't* be—and yet, I do believe it's Dora! *Why—Do-ra!*"

And by way of reply, Dora sat down on a fallen log beside the road, and burst out into tears and sobs. Reuben stood over her, in a puzzled way.

"Don't, Dora!" pleaded he, "now, don't! You don't know how it hurts me to see you do like that. Jump up now, that's a good girl, and I'll take you right straight home with me, where you can set down by the fire, and rest a spell, and drink a cup of tea."

"I have been there," said Dora, trying to speak articulately through her tears. "I asked for you. I wanted to come in, but *she* turned me away!"

“Do you mean—”

“I mean your wife.”

Reuben turned his face aside, set his teeth hard, and clinched his hands until the nails cut into the flesh.

“Con-found that woman!” he muttered, under his breath. “But just you look here, Dora. We’ll go back together, you and me, and I’ll show Almiry who’s master in the house, she or me. Come!”

“No,” said Dora, drawing back, with an inscrutable look on her face. “Never to *that* house again!”

“Dora!”

“I know you mean kindly, Reuben,” said she, “but you don’t know how it hurts to have such words as *that* spoken in one’s ears. But after all, that matters little,” she added, speaking rapidly and laying her hand on his arm. “*You* will tell me, Reuben, will you not?”

“Tell you what, Dora?” The strong man’s heart melted like wax at the pathos of her voice, the pleading earnestness of her face as she stood there in the deep, scented shadow of the pines.

“Where they are gone. Joanna—and my children?”

Reuben staggered back a pace or two in genuine surprise.

“Don’t *you* know, Dora?”

“I?” she cried out, wildly. “How should I know? I left my little ones here, a little while ago. Joanna promised me to care for them, and take my place to them while I was gone—and now I come back and they are not here. She should have written to me; she should have told me—but, good heavens! how should she know anything of the holy mysteries of a mother’s love? Where is she, Reuben? where has she taken my little ones? That is all that I want to know!”

“Well, I declare,” cried poor Reuben, in dire perplexity, “if this don’t beat all! Joanna, she went round and told everybody that you’d deserted the children, and left ’em on her hands.”

“I?” shrieked Dora. “*Deserted* my own children?”

“I told ’em I didn’t believe a word of it,” said Reuben.

“I told ’em it wasn’t noways like you, but she made all the neighborhood believe it, and then she got some grand folks to adopt Walter.”

“To adopt my child?” cried Dora, frantic with grief and terror. “To take my boy away from his own mother!”

“Yes,” nodded Reuben; “and she brought Nell to our house—said she was goin’ away somewhere or other—that’s Joanna, I mean—and wanted us to take Nelly. I’d have been

proper glad, I can tell you, for I always had a soft spot in my heart for Nell, but Almiry she wouldn't hear a word of it—so what does Joanna do but takes Nelly up to the poor-house at Chichester.”

Dora had grown white with anger, save where two scarlet spots glowed deeply on her cheeks.

“To the—*poor-house!*” she gasped. “My little Nell! Reuben, Reuben, you must be dreaming!”

“No, I ain't,” said Reuben. “It's true enough, more's the pity. She left Nell at the poor-house; but you know Nell always was a dreadful taking child, and they set a deal of store by her there, and made a reg'lar little poppet of her.”

“My baby,” repeated Dora, wringing her hands, “in the poor-house! Oh, God help me! what dreadful crime have I committed to deserve a punishment like this?”

“Now, you're making a deal too much of it,” said Reuben. “The child had a good home enough, and as I told you afore they made a deal of fuss over her. And Joanna, she cleared out, bag and baggage, and the furniture is sold, and there's a ‘*To Let, or For Sale*’ on the house half as big as a barn door, and—”

“Do not tell me of the house—what do I care for the house?” burst out impatient Dora. “Joanna—where is *she*?”

“We don't know,” said Reuben. “Nobody knows. We kind o' calculate she didn't mean folks to know. Well, but that ain't all. She hadn't been gone a month hardly afore along comes your husband, the grand English gentleman.”

Dora put her hand over her heart, as if the firm pressure could quell its stormy beating.

“My husband,” she repeated. “Did—did he ask for me?”

Reuben shook his head gloomily. “He was dreadful put out with you about something or another,” said he. “At least so Mahala Mussel said—he went there to inquire of Mahala, when he found the old homestead shut up—”

“Ah!” thought poor Dora, with a sickening faintness at her heart, “he had seen Lady Augusta Trente—he had had an opportunity to compare her with poor, poor me!”

“But,” went on Reuben, “he was dead set to find the children. And he went up to the poor-house, and got Nell, and took her away with a fine lady nurse as proud as Punch.”

“And Wally, too?” gasped Dora. “Did he take away my boy—my little curly-haired lad?”

“How could he?” said Reuben. “Didn't I tell you?

Wally was adopted out to some one as saw him playin' round under Joanna's feet and took a dreadful shine to him."

"But who was it?"

"Joanna never told me."

"And where has he gone?" wildly questioned Dora.

"It was a fine lady as was stopping somewhere in Saratoga for her health, but she's gone away long ago, and taken the boy with her. And there can't no trace be found of 'er. Your husband—Sir Basil they call him now, don't they—had the police and a lot of New York detectives up here, but it wasn't no use!"

And all the agonized questions which Dora could ask elicited no further information from honest Reuben. He had told all that he knew, and he was no conjurer to invent anything more.

She flung herself wildly on the road-side bank, wet with evening dew, and cushioned with soft pine needles, and gave way to a tempest of tears and sobs which rent poor Reuben's very heart.

"Don't take on so, Dolly—now don't!" said Reuben, relapsing unconsciously into an old caressing appellation of their girl and boy days. "It'll all come right, now see if it don't. Most things comes right, if only you can have patience to wait. *Don't*, Dolly!" softly patting her shoulders with the tips of his great horny fingers. "You'll fret yourself into a fever, and then what will become of you? And now I think of it," fumbling in all his pockets, "there's a letter addressed to Joanna in my very vest-pocket now."

Dora sat up, dashing the streaming tears from her eyes, with a gleam of hope irradiating her heart.

"A—letter! for Joanna," she cried out. "Oh, let me have it; perhaps it is about Walter; perhaps it will afford me some clew to his whereabouts."

"The postmaster he asked me if I could tell him where Joanna was," said Reuben, producing a dirty and much be-thumbed missive. "I told him I had Sir Basil's address as the detective officer writ down on a piece of paper, and likely he would know, if I didn't. And I was a-goin' to forward it to the detective office, in New York, when I got a chance to do it without Almiry's findin' it out. For the very name of Beck is enough to set Almiry on pins and needles."

"Give it to me!" cried Dora, hurrying out of the glade to where the moonbeams could light up her newly found treasure.

But, alas! how heavily her head sunk once more, when,

tearing open the soiled envelope, she recognized only her own old letter, dictated to Mrs. Pomfret months ago, and mailed from Southampton.

"Then she never got it!" cried Dora, faintly. "Oh, what frightful mystery is this?"

She tore the letter into scraps, and scattered them passionately on the wind.

"What's that for, Dora?" remonstrated Reuben. "Don't you know I'm responsible for that there letter to the post-office department?"

"It's mine," said Dora. "I wrote it myself—or at least I dictated it. And is this all that you know, Reuben?"

"All," nodded Reuben, "and all that any one else knows. Come, Dora, it's gettin' late, and the wind blows up cold. Come back home with me, to-night, at least."

She snatched her arm angrily from his grasp.

"Never!" cried she. "Have I not told you so once already?"

"You're goin' to Mahala Mussel's then?"

"No—yes, what does it matter where I go?" passionately demanded poor, half-crazed Dora. "My husband has ceased to love me, and I have lost both my little ones—what matters it where I hide my head now?"

"But, Dora—"

"I can't stop to talk any longer now," said she, wildly. "Good-bye, Reuben—you mean well, but you can't understand how I feel. No one can. Good-bye!"

And she vanished into the pine woods like a dissolving shadow.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MISS JOSCELYN.

ALL that weary night Theodora Branchley wandered up and down the road where the ghostly poplars rustled in the wind, and the wan moonlight crept with silver feet over the peaked roof of the old house. Once she went around to the back, and, sitting down by the Great Rock at the foot of the garden, slaked her thirst in the cool, dripping waters of the spring, and bathed her forehead in the crystal drops. Ah, how long it seemed since she had sat there as a girl, with the old, be-thumbed novels in her lap, and the bright, vague dreams of an ideal love-life floating through her brain! Could it be possible that she, this worn, haggard, heart-broken woman, was the same Dora Beck who had so often hidden away under the

drooping branches of the pear boughs from Joanna's shrill tongue and sharp, critical eye, and lost all her annoyances and perplexities in the magical pages of some bewitching love story? No need, now, to have recourse to books for romance, and sorrow, and ever-recurring complications. Poor little Dora!—she had yearned to be the heroine of a novel, and now that her aspirations had all been fulfilled, she stood wringing her hands in the spectral moonlight, and wishing that she were dead.

“Oh, Joanna,” she whispered, looking up to the little casement opening from the room which had once been Joanna's, “how could you be so cruel! I trusted them to you and you have failed me! But I will forgive you, all, *all*, Joanna, if you will only come back and tell me where my little Walter is! He's *mine*, Joanna, a part of my life, and being, and heart; he never felt a pang but it cut through my own heart also, he never uttered a cry that did not pierce my soul! My little gold-haired, velvet-cheeked boy, with the diamond eyes and the voice that was like music! and he is gone away from me and I do not know where. They have hidden him.”

And hurrying around and around the house, with wild haunting eyes and face deathly pale in the moonlight, Theodora kept her vigil until the gray light broke along the eastern horizon and the stars faded away, one by one, and an instinctive dread of discovery induced her to shrink once more into the gloomy recesses of the Great Rock where the wild grapevines formed a natural drapery and the drooping pear boughs nearly touched the ground. For poor Dora was like the wounded fawn that covets solitude and isolation in its sore distress.

It must have been about eight o'clock, so far as she could judge of the progress of time, when Dora heard Reuben Hallowell's voice in front of the house, calling her, and saw the old white horse tied to a tree at the gate.

“She ain't here!” said Reuben, in a disappointed tone.

“I told you she wouldn't be,” retorted the voice of Abraham Mosher, the man who kept the corner store by the mill. “What on earth should bring her to an old deserted hole like this, without a spark of fire, or a mouthful of anything to eat or drink?”

“I don't know,” said Reuben, dubiously. “You see, Bram, I kind o' thought she wasn't quite right here,” tapping his forehead, “and I thought it only natural and likely as she'd come here to the old home.”

“Not she,” said Abraham, disdainfully. “And besides, if

you had found her, Reuben, what would you have done with her?"

"I'd a-took her home!" declared the young farmer.

"The asylum's the place for her, if she really is cracked in the upper story," said Mosher, carelessly. "Come, you've been through the house, and looked in every room, and you're certain she ain't here. Let's go on."

"I never felt so sorry for any one in my life," said Reuben, dolefully. "I declare, it was a mean thing of Joanna Beck to go off so!"

And the footsteps of the two men shuffled along through the tall grass and weeds, and the sound of receding wheels told Dora that she was once more alone.

But Reuben Hallowell's words had not been lost upon her. The asylum! Did that mean a hideous place of restraint for those who had drifted beyond the reach of all human kindness or charity—a pandemonium of unsettled brains and howling madness?

"I am not mad," she told herself. "No one shall dare to hint that I am."

And creeping quietly through the back fields, she hastened away, with cheeks blanched with a new and terrible fear.

"I will go back to England," she told herself. "Not to him—not to the husband whose love I have long since forfeited; that is all past and gone. But to some place where I can be near my Nelly, even though Nelly should never recognize me, save as the merest stranger. For, although I love her too dearly to interpose myself between her and the sunshine of prosperity, I *must* see her now and then or I shall die of heart-starvation."

Miss Brydges was drinking a leisurely cup of tea, in the little oval den in the "Royal Beatrice," when a knock sounded at the door, and Dora appeared before her, haggard and travel-worn, with great eyes shining preternaturally bright, and cheeks glowing with hectic red.

"Well, I declare," said Miss Brydges. "It's Mrs. Bracy!"

"Yes," said Dora, sinking into a chair, "it is I. You told me to come back to you if ever I wanted a friend, Miss Brydges; but I suppose you hardly expected that I should claim your promise so soon?"

"Well, no," said Miss Brydges, "I didn't. But I'm a woman of my word, and what I say I stick to. Sit down, Mrs. Bracy, and have a cup of tea and a waffle, with a bit of quince-marmalade to keep it company."

Dora eat and drank with famished eagerness. Miss Brydges sat looking on with puzzled eyes.

"So you didn't succeed in finding your friends?" said she.

"No," said Dora, with a shudder.

"And what are you going to do now?" asked the stewardess, looking thoughtfully into the tea-pot, as if it were a well-spring of inspiration.

"I want to work my passage back to England," said Dora.

"You're too late," said Miss Brydges. "We've engaged a young woman in your place."

Dora uttered a little despairing exclamation.

"Oh!" cried she, "what shall I do?"

"But," added Miss Brydges, "so far as I can see, you're the very woman for Miss Joscelyn."

"For—Miss Joscelyn?" said Dora, looking up with wide-open eyes of surprise.

"For Miss Joscelyn," nodded the stewardess.

"Who is she?" questioned Dora.

"An old lady as has engaged passage for noon to-day," said Miss Brydges.

"Where is she?"

"In her state-room now, crying and scolding because her maid was secretly married to the head-waiter at the Crampton Hotel, where she's been staying, and declines to go back to England with her. And she can't bear the idea of a strange attendant; so I told her as I and Matilda Calverley—that's the young woman as I've engaged as assistant—would do all we could for her. But she's a rich lady, and inclined to be capricious; and she don't like Matilda because of a cast in her eye, and the color of her hair, as is red. And I shouldn't a bit wonder if she'd be agreeable to pay your passage over if you could suit her, as maid."

"But," hesitated Dora, shrinking back, with natural doubt, "if she shouldn't like *me*."

"It won't cost much to try, anyhow," said Miss Brydges, fastening a cover on her jar of marmalade, and putting it into a cupboard. "You're good-looking, and you've a soft, pleasant way with you as will be pretty certain to take her fancy. Come," and she rose up with a determined air.

"Where?"

"To Miss Joscelyn."

And with a failing heart Dora followed the tall stewardess out across the luxuriously furnished saloon, with its carpet of pale blue moquette, its acres of gilding and sheets of shining mirrors, and into one of the most desirable and expensive

state-rooms, where an old lady in gray curls and a black satin dress sat among a Babel of boxes, trunks, and packages, which she was vainly trying to classify by aid of a written list in her lap.

"Stewardness," said the old lady, "is that you?"

"Yes, ma'am, if you please," courtesied Miss Brydges.

"I hope you're getting on comfortably?"

"I'm not at all," said the old lady. "The ice-pitcher is upset over my paper parcels, and the sugar is all dissolving, and the lemons have rolled under the berth where I can't reach them, not even with the umbrella-hook—and I've lost my eyeglasses. And that young person with the cross-eyes has such an injurious effect upon my nervous system that I have been obliged to send her out of the room. I think, stewardess, you'll have to put my things together, and call a cab, and send me back to the Crampton Hotel, until I can get some one to replace Marie. I'm afraid I'm not equal to a sea voyage without the services of a maid."

"Oh, dear, ma'am, but that would be a pity, with your packing-cases and all on board," said Miss Brydges, rescuing two of the refractory lemons, which were rolling about the floor, and whisking a pasteboard cap-box out of the meandering flood of ice-water. "I'll send a waiter directly to wipe up the floor and carry away the lumps of ice—and, in the meantime, Miss Joscelyn, ma'am, here's our assistant stewardess last voyage—a very reliable young woman, well recommended by Doctor Anneslie, of St. Hilarius, at Southampton, as wants to earn her passage, and would be proud of a chance to be your maid."

Miss Joscelyn stared at Dora in a near-sighted way.

"Where are my eyeglasses?" said she.

"I think, ma'am, they are sticking in your belt," said Dora, venturing to point at the article in question.

"I like that," said Miss Joscelyn, approvingly, as she fitted them across the bridge of her aquiline nose and took a survey of the aspirant to office. "It proves that you are naturally of an observant temperament. What is your name, young woman?"

"Dora Bracy, ma'am."

"How old are you?"

"I'm nearly twenty."

"Humph!" commented Mrs Joscelyn. "Have you ever lived as lady's-maid, Bracy?"

"No, madame," said Dora, timidly; "but I think I could make myself useful to you, if you would allow me to try."

"You're sure she's quite decent and respectable, stewardess?" said Miss Joscelyn, turning to Miss Brydges, and speaking in an audible "aside," while poor Dora felt the scarlet blood mount to the very roots of her hair.

"Oh, quite, ma'am! I'll answer for *that*," said the stewardess. "Doctor Anneslie, you know—"

"Well, I'll give you a trial, at any rate, young woman," said Miss Joscelyn. "I'll pay your passage-money, and may be add a little present when we reach Southampton, if you suit me and do your work well."

"Thank you, madame," said Dora, with real gratitude in her heart.

"Here's the list that Marie, the ungrateful creature, made out," said Miss Joscelyn. "Just compare it with the cases and things, and see that everything is here, all right and safe. I've counted and puzzled and searched for my eyeglasses until my head is all in a whirl."

Moving quietly around, Dora soon succeeded in restoring the chaos to comparative order, verified the list, and filled Miss Joscelyn's perturbed heart with satisfaction.

"I declare," said the old lady, as she lay among her pillows with a cut-glass smelling-bottle pressed to her nostrils, "you're a deal quicker and quieter than Marie."

"Am I?" said Dora, smiling sadly.

"Are you seasick on the ocean?"

"No, madame."

"That's another advantage," said Miss Joscelyn. "Marie *was*!"

"Indeed!"

"But," added the old lady, "I'm afraid you're not healthy."

"I am, madame, quite so," assured Dora.

"You are so pale," commented the old lady. "And you've such a sad face."

"I have reasons to look sad," said Dora, folding Miss Joscelyn's myriad of crumpled shawls, and bestowing them safely in the little square locker under the window. "I have lost all my friends."

"Dear, dear," said Miss Joscelyn. "And you so young. But now get the cologne and camphor bottles out, so you can lay your hand on them at a minute's notice, for I feel the steamer moving, and I'm always sick the very moment we leave harbor! And tell the stewardess to have iced champagne ready for me, the moment I call for it—and look after the novels and books, Dora, and get a lemon all cut in slices, and

tell the waiter to bring me a basin of clear soup the minute dinner is served. Oh, dear, dear, these sea voyages! If ever I reach English shores again, I'll stay there!"

"We shall soon be there," said Dora, encouragingly.

"Oh, my poor head!" groaned Miss Joscelyn. "Take off the cap, Dora, and unpin the little puffs, and unfasten the switch. I *know* I'm going to be very ill this passage. And inquire if there are any decent peaches on board, Dora—I need something to moisten my lips—and tell the stewardess to bring me a cup of iced tea at once."

"Well," said Miss Brydges, when Dora came to deliver the multitudinous messages, "how is she getting on?"

"She isn't seasick," said Dora, with a smile, "but she thinks she is."

"She will be," nodded the stewardess, "if stuffing herself with a lot of different things can do it. It's always so. She has crossed five times, and she never learns wisdom from experience. However, I'll have the champagne ready, and here's the iced tea, and Gabriel will bring you some peaches and bananas."

And before night Miss Joscelyn was declaring, in the agonies of seasickness, that she wished herself dead.

It was a brief experience, however. The weather was delightfully clear and calm, the ocean smooth as glass, and at the end of three days Miss Joscelyn crept on deck leaning on her new maid's arm, and suffered herself to be established in a reclining-chair, with pillows, rugs, and shawls disposed comfortably around her.

"Dora Bracy," said Miss Joscelyn, "you've been very kind and attentive through this sickness of mine."

"Thank you, madame," said Dora, simply.

"And it's very considerate of you not to be seasick yourself," added the old lady.

Dora smiled.

"I can hardly claim any credit on that score," said she.

"No, to be sure; but still it's all in my favor," said Miss Joscelyn; "and if I hadn't written to my friend, Lady Osprey, to engage her own maid's sister for me, to meet me at Southampton, I should be almost tempted to retain you in my services."

Dora looked wistfully at the old lady, but said nothing. It had come across her sometimes, like a brooding shadow, when she was busy in her ceaseless ministrations—what was to become of her when once more they set foot upon English soil? She was ashamed to annoy her good friends at the hospital

with any further calls upon their kindness—and she knew not whither to turn.

“I should be very glad of a good place,” said she, in a low voice.

“Should you?” said Miss Joscelyn, kindly. “Well, I think I know of one.”

Dora looked up with kindling eyes and rising color.

“Oh, madame,” said she, “if you could recommend me anywhere, I should be so grateful.”

“You read well,” said Miss Joscelyn. “I’ve noticed that when you’ve been reading me to sleep of an afternoon. And you are quiet and handy. Your dress is an objection.”

Dora looked down with a blush at her faded alpaca suit.

“Yes, I know,” acknowledged she; “but—but I am very poor, Miss Joscelyn. I have no money to purchase an outfit.”

“Don’t mind that, my dear,” said Miss Joscelyn, kindly; “I only mentioned it because I know my friend Lady Osprey is a little fastidious in the matter of outward appearances. I’ve an old black silk dress somewhere among my things that you can have. I don’t doubt that you can manage to alter it over to fit you very nicely, and I don’t mind giving you a pound note when we reach Southampton; to help you to reach my friend’s place near Monmouth.”

“Monmouth!” echoed Dora, looking up with sparkling eyes and color that was brighter than ever. “Did you say *Monmouth*?”

“Yes,” said Miss Joscelyn, in some surprise. “Do you like Monmouth?”

“I—I think it is beautiful there,” cried Dora, radiantly. “I was near Monmouth once. Oh, I should like that neighborhood so much.”

“Lady Osprey has a very fine place there,” said Miss Joscelyn. “Reader and companion to her and her niece, that is the situation you will be called upon to fill. They don’t pretend to pay very high wages, but it is a very genteel position, and there are plenty of young women who would be glad to get it. They have employed a very worthy young person in that capacity for five years, but she has lately married a missionary and gone to China to live, and as Lady Osprey is rather difficult to please—”

“Oh!” cried out Dora, with quickened pulses and eyes all aglow, “do you think I could be so fortunate as to suit her?”

“I don’t know why not,” said Miss Joscelyn, good-naturedly. “One thing is quite certain, my recommendation would

have weight with her, and it shall not be lacking. And now child, get that novel and read to me a little. I feel as if my nerves needed quieting. When you've been through all the trouble that I have, Dora, *you* will have nerves, too!"

Dora smiled sadly to herself as she toiled down into the state-room to get the book in which Miss Joscelyn was just then interested, and wondered to herself what Miss Joscelyn could know of real griefs and tribulations—the good old lady whose greatest trial was the sickness of a pet poodle, or the misfit of a collar.

"At twenty years old," thought poor Dora, "I have lived a longer life than she has at sixty!"

But while her lips pronounced mechanically the printed words of the page, and Miss Joscelyn dozed behind her black satin fan, Dora's brain was busy with the future. A place in Monmouth; a situation where she could be near Branchley-upon-Usk! Where, perhaps, she could sometimes see, or hear of, the old manor house itself, where her lost husband dwelt, and where little Nell played under the shadows of the giant beeches and spreading limes, forgetting the while that she ever had such a thing as a mother! Where, like a forgotten ghost, she could hover around the outskirts of the earthly paradise that held her precious ones, and hear their laughter as the echoes of happy spirit-voices may sometimes float across the gulf that divides this world and the next! And Dora's heart stood still as she thought of all this. Oh! she pondered, was there ever such a fortuitous combination of circumstances as this? If only she could succeed in pleasing this unknown and critical Lady Osprey!

And then she remembered little Walter, and the tears choked her utterance; she could read no further.

"My child, my child!" she murmured to herself, clasping both hands over her eyes.

Fortunately Miss Joscelyn had fallen fast asleep with her mouth wide open, and her head tilted back at an angle of forty-five degrees. And when at last she roused herself by a snore a degree louder than its predecessors, Theodora was leaning over the guards opposite, with grave, intent eyes fixed upon the rush of the foaming billows.

"I do believe I've been dozing for a minute or two," said Miss Joscelyn. "But go on, Dora, go on; I've never once lost the thread of the story!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A NEW HOME.

It was a bright autumn afternoon when our heroine found herself standing on the platform in the little town of Monmouth, whose picturesque spires were darkly outlined against the dark wreaths of smoke that rose up from the monster iron-works at the left. A lovely place, instinct with life and vitality, and surrounded with sylvan scenery—a place for Old England to be proud of!

“My Lady Osprey’s?” said the station-master. “Of The Chestnuts? Oh, yes, ma’am, our people know the place very well. Let me see—is this all the luggage you have?” glancing down at the one modest box with which Dora had provided herself at Southampton.

“That is all,” confessed Dora, a little ashamed at the scantiness of her own surroundings.

“Shall I call a fly for you?” asked the station-master, who was always especially polite to Lady Osprey’s guests.

“Is it too far to walk?” questioned Dora, nervously playing with the steel rings of her purse.

“Five miles, and a trifle over,” said the man. “And not the best road in the country, neither. Oh, no, ma’am, I don’t think you could walk it!” with a deprecatory glance at Dora’s pale face and fragile, drooping figure.

“Please call the fly, then,” said Dora, quietly—and the station-master, who owned a one third interest in the livery establishment, made haste to fulfill her behests before she should alter her mind on the subject.

“Is Branchley-upon-Usk near here?” she asked, with as much carelessness as she could assume, when he returned once more.

“Fifteen miles,” said the station-master. “That is, fifteen miles from The Chestnuts. It’s a matter of three miles or so nearer here, in a direct line. The manor house is nearer still. Ever visited Branchley Manor House, ma’am?”

“No,” said Dora, faintly. “I am a stranger in this part of the country.”

“It’s well worth a visit, ma’am, I can assure you,” said the man. “One of the oldest places in the neighborhood. They say it was once a Benedictine monastery—the old chapel is still in existence.”

“Is it?”

"I could give you a card to the housekeeper, ma'am, if you cared to see the place," added the man. "She is an old friend of mine, and would, I am sure, take great pleasure in showing it on any Friday you choose to call, between the hours of twelve and three."

"Thanks," said Dora; "but it is not likely that I shall have the opportunity of seeing the manor house. Is this my conveyance? Then I will start at once."

The Chestnuts was a rambling old red-brick house, too small for a mansion, too large for a farm-house, which seemed hid away among great masses of trees—a picturesque pile, with antique chimney-pots, oriel windows projecting from every nook and corner, and a pretty little glass-roofed conservatory at the south end, through whose crystal sides the tropical foliage of palms and bananas, and wreathing passion-flowers was distinctly visible. The lawn, closely cut and smooth as a sheet of green plush, was broken by no intrusive flower-beds; the drive, shaded by giant chestnut-trees, wound up from the carriage gates, and Theodora presently found herself standing trembling on the bowery veranda, where late banksia roses hung in fragrant clusters, and ivy and clematis mantled the walls with a rank embroidery of green. A maid, in a smart cap, trimmed with a profusion of blue ribbon bows, came to the door.

"Is Lady Osprey at home?" Dora asked.

The maid glanced in some surprise at the waiting fly, and the box, and the slight figure standing all alone on the veranda.

"Yes, ma'am, she's at home," said she, dubiously; "but—"

"Here is your fare," said Dora to the man; and then turning to the maid, she added, with dignity: "I will come in, if you please, and sit down, while you give this note from Miss Josecelyn to your mistress."

"Then she is a lady," thought Mary, taking the note with a low courtesy. "I almost thought as she was one o' them genteel confidence women as comes around with photographs and point lace, and cashmere shawls to sell, and cuts away with the parlor ornaments while you goes up to the lady. Please to walk into the drawing-room, ma'am," she added, aloud, "and I'll take the letter up to my lady immediate."

And Dora found herself in a long, low room, redolent of dried rose-leaves and the scent of mignonette and sweet peas in tiny cut-glass holders. Deep crimson curtains draped the windows; the carpet was of some velvet-soft material in dim

Persian colors, and great Bagdad rugs lay in front of a cheerful grate fire. A gilded easel, containing one of Turner's stormy sunset skies, stood in the deep bay-window, where the level afternoon sunshine struck it as with an Ithuriel spear of gold, waking the tints into marvelous life and intensity; and the pale-gray walls were hung with water-colored sketches and panel pictures of flowers. Old china, in every possible form and device, loaded the velvet-covered mantel; chairs and sofas of deep-red satin stood around as if the room had been but recently occupied, and a pair of garden gloves lay beside a bunch of newly gathered ferns on a small table of Mexican onyx, garlanded with swinging silver chains, near the door. There was no barbaric splendor of upholstery here, no striving after effect; but all looked cozy, refined, and home-like.

Dora was standing by the fire, looking at the glowing crimson of the Turner sunset, and wondering how people could possibly inspire a piece of dull, dead canvas with such life and brilliance, when an opposite door opened softly, and a tall old lady, with silver-white hair, and eyes that glowed like black diamonds, came in—an old lady dressed in black velvet, with a great star of diamonds glistening on her breast, and a coiffure of costly black lace floating away from her head as she walked.

"I am Lady Osprey," said she, with the imperial air of an ancient princess. "And you—"

"I am Mrs. Bracy, madame, at your service," said Dora, deeply impressed with the mien and bearing of this beautiful old vision.

"Mrs. Bracy?" Lady Osprey referred to the open letter in her hand. "My friend's note says simply Dora Bracy. Are you a widow?"

Dora colored deeply.

"I am not a widow, madame," said she, "but—"

"Your husband has left you?"

Dora inclined her head. "But it is all the same as if I were a widow," said she, with simple pathos. "I have my own living to earn, and Miss Jocelyn was kind enough to suggest that—"

"I see," said Lady Osprey, whose keen jet-black eyes had been studying Dora's face while she spoke. "It is the old story over again, I suppose—man's neglect and woman's despair. I can not say that I care to hear the particulars. You are very young?"

"I am nineteen, madame."

"Tell me what you can do?" said Lady Osprey.

Dora hesitated in painful embarrassment at this very leading question.

"Indeed, madame," said she, "I can do very little. I am not what the world calls accomplished; but I can read tolerably well, and I am quick with the needle, and I am most anxious to please."

"Good!" said Lady Osprey, thoughtfully, nodding her head. "I like that better than the oily protestations of these old maids who would fain make you believe that they know everything. Well, Mrs. Bracy, or Dora, I would rather call you—"

"If you please, madame," said the girl, meekly.

"Upon my friend Miss Joscelyn's representations I will try you for a little while. If you suit me, well and good; if not, there is no harm done. My niece's opinion is of more consequence than my own; but I presume, if you do your best, she will endeavor to be satisfied. Here she comes now!" with a sudden turn of the silver white head, and a brightening of the whole face.

A swift, light footstep came with a sort of elastic swing along the softly carpeted hall—the door was opened, and a tall, slight figure came in, with both hands full of glowing autumn leaves. A brilliant dark-eyed girl, with a profusion of silky black hair floating down over her shoulders, and cheeks all rose-red with her walk in the crisp October wind. And Dora Branchley recoiled with a sudden start and a paling brow, as she recognized the dusk Oriental beauty of—Lady Augusta Trente!

"My dear," said Lady Osprey, "this is a young woman recommended to us by my friend, Helena Joscelyn, as a reader and companion, in Caroline Carter's place. And I think, if you do not object, I will try her."

"Object!" echoed Lady Augusta, with a laugh. "Why on earth should I object, Aunt Aurora? I dare say she will do very well, and—dear me, how very white she is! Jones," ringing the bell violently, "bring a glass of wine or something; the poor girl is quite done up with her journey!"

But Theodora had recovered herself with an effort.

"Pardon me," said she, "but it is not necessary. I am quite well now. It was merely the fatigue of the railway journey and the heat of the room."

"Bring the wine, Jones," said Lady Augusta. "It will do you good, Miss—"

"Mrs. Bracy," said Lady Osprey. "Dora, we shall call her."

And as Dora drank the wine which was presently brought her on a small tray of the finest chased silver, Lady Augusta stood regarding her with calm curiosity, as if she were a package of dry-goods which had just been sent home on approval.

"She has a most beautiful face," said she, in an audible aside to Lady Osprey. "And a low, soft voice. Caroline Carter's voice was like the scraping of a tuneless violin. And Miss Mygatt spoke through her nose. Where did Miss Joscelyn pick her up?"

"On board the American steamer, I believe," answered the elder lady. "And I am disposed to think I shall try her."

"By all means," nodded Lady Augusta. "And—dear me, what a screaming! It is Rosa in trouble again."

The words were still on her lips, when the door flew open with a bang that knocked over a slender vase of carnations, and set the crystal pendants to the old silver chandeliers to jingling wildly, and a girl of twelve or thirteen, in a short Holland linen dress, thick boots, and ink-black hair flying behind, like the mane of a Shetland pony, rushed in, and ensconced herself behind Lady Osprey's black velvet skirts. She was followed by a prim, middle-aged person in spectacles and a dyed brown silk dress, and both were in a highly excited state.

"Rosamond," said Lady Osprey, gravely, "what does this mean? Miss Goodall, may I ask the reason of this very extraordinary scene?"

"I beg your pardon, Lady Osprey," said Miss Goodall, catching her breath in short pants; "but I have caught Lady Rosamond in the stable-yard again."

"It's a lie!" said Lady Rosamond Trente, with a grimace. "You didn't!" And having uttered this defiance, she shrunk back behind Lady Osprey's black velvet drapery.

"Or, at least," corrected Miss Goodall, "she was just coming out. I think the gate had just closed behind her. And if you will kindly look at her dress or her boots, Lady Osprey, I think you will perceive that she has been riding the bare-backed pony again! when I supposed her doing her French verbs in the school-room, Lady Osprey. And when I ventured to remonstrate upon this *very extra-ordinary* conduct, she called me a meddling old pussy-cat, and threw the 'Ancient Atlas' at me!"

"Rosamond!" said Lady Osprey, gravely, "what does this mean?"

The dark-cheeked young rebel peeped sulkily around her aunt's dress.

"It's all true," said she; "she is a meddling old pussycat; and the school-room was so awfully hot and stuffy, and the pony is so jolly; and Henrico has taught me to ride without a bit or a bridle!"

"Lady Osprey," panted the excited governess, "is this to be tolerated?"

"Rosamond," said the old lady, solemnly, "you must ask Miss Goodall's pardon."

"I won't," said Lady Rosamond. "I hate her—and I won't ask her pardon!"

"Aunt Aurora," said Lady Augusta, interfering in great indignation, "you really must put a stop to this barbarism. Rosamond is getting beyond everything!"

Lady Rosamond made a fearful grimace at her elder sister.

"Mind your own business, miss," said she. "I wish you'd get married and clear out of here. I and Aunt Aurora always get along well enough without you."

"Rosamond," reiterated the old lady, "I tell you you must ask Miss Goodall's pardon."

"And I tell you I won't," said Lady Rosamond, who had now scrambled up on the window-sill like a cat; "I've quarreled with Miss Goodall—and I've meant to, this long time. Ask her pardon, indeed! Let her ask mine!"

"Aunt Aurora," said Lady Augusta, "why do you endure this insolence from such a child? Why don't you send her to her own room?"

"My dear," said Lady Osprey, despairingly, "she wouldn't go."

"Of course I wouldn't," said Lady Rosamond, swinging her big boots to and fro, for she was just at the awkward age when the hands and feet are preternaturally developed; when the graces of childhood are gone, and the winning attractions of maidenhood have not yet taken their place. And yet she was pretty in her wild gypsy way, with great black eyes, an olive-dark complexion, and luxuriant black locks veiling her face like a mist.

"Now she's eating peanuts," groaned Lady Augusta, "and throwing the shells out of the window."

"Peanuts are good," said Lady Rosamond. "Henrico gave 'em to me."

"That is the new groom, Aunt Aurora," said Lady Augusta. "Pretty lessons she is learning from *him*!"

"Let him alone," said Lady Rosamond, aiming a nutshell with perilous accuracy of aim at her sister's face. "He's a

deal better looking than the spindle-shanked fellow that you're going to marry."

"Rosamond, be silent," said Lady Osprey, roused at last into something like decision. "Miss Goodall, if you will return to the school-room, I will send my niece there presently. If she will not beg your pardon, I must do it for her."

"Oh, Lady Osprey," apologized the governess, "I never meant—"

But Lady Osprey's white, jeweled hand motioned courteously to the door, and Miss Goodall was compelled to obey.

"Rosamond," said the old lady, when the door had closed upon the still trembling and indignant form of the governess, "you are a very naughty girl."

"Who's that?" said Lady Rosamond, pointing with one brown finger to the slight, motionless figure of Dora Bracy in the window.

"It is no matter who she is."

"But I want to know," persisted Lady Rosamond. "Who is it, Aunt Aurora?"

"It is Dora, my new companion."

"I like her looks," said Lady Rosamond, still swinging her boots. "She is pretty, and she's got a dimple in her chin. Come here, Dora, and let me look at you closer."

Dora obeyed, blushing up to the very roots of her hair.

"Ah!" said Lady Rosamond, patting her cheek. "If you'd get me a governess like *this*, Aunt Aurora, I'd learn. Come, won't you take Miss Goodall for a reader, and let me have Dora?"

"Rosamond," groaned Lady Osprey, "this is really beyond endurance. Augusta, will you ring the bell for Jones? Jones," to the maid, "take Mrs. Bracy up to the little red room in the south wing, and see that her things are carried there. I will see you again presently, Dora."

And as Dora followed the woman upstairs, she could hear the voices of Lady Osprey and her elder niece mingled in spirited discussion; while above them both rose the shrill decided accents of the refractory young rebel, crying out:

"I won't beg her pardon! No, I won't, not if you flay me alive!"

Jones pursed up her lips.

"It's one of Lady Rosamond's rampageous days," said she. "She is a dreadful trial, is Lady Rosamond—and yet my lady is fond of her, too. This is the room, Mrs. Bracy," opening the door of a neat, low-ceiled apartment, hung with crimson cretonne, and furnished after a substantial old-fashioned style,

with solid dark mahogany, claw-legged tables, and a bedstead hung with red cretonne curtains. "Maria will bring you up a cup of tea presently, and you'll please to ring if you want anything else."

And the next minute Dora was alone.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SITUATION AS GOVERNESS.

SHE sat down in a low chair by the window, mechanically unfastening the strings of her hat, while she looked out across the rustling tree-tops and velvet lawns, to a glimpse of blue water in the distance, and pondered on the strange future which seemed to be unrolling itself before her.

"Only fifteen miles from Branchley," she murmured to herself. "Fifteen miles from my child! fifteen miles from *him*! Oh, kind Heaven! I thought I should be happier when I was nearer to them, but the sick longing at my heart only grows more intense. If I could see them—if I could touch my child's hand, or her cheek, or her hair! If I could only catch a glimpse of them, from afar off! And perhaps I may," with a sudden brightening of her eyes, a rising color in her cheeks. "Oh, perhaps I may! For I think I could live a twelve-month on one little look! Luck has befriended me in bringing me so close to them—perhaps it may befriend me even further still!"

She had scarcely drunk the cup of tea brought her by the blue-ribboned maid, who had opened the door to her, when Lady Osprey herself came to the room.

"Dora," said she, seating herself opposite the young stranger, "I have come to make you a very strange proposal."

Dora looked up in surprise.

"My niece, Lady Rosamond Trente, has taken a fancy that she would like you as a governess," went on Lady Osprey. "I think, upon the whole, that I will transfer your services from myself to her. Rosamond is very capricious and fantastic in her ideas, and I am compelled, to a certain degree, to humor them. Her mother—my brother Fauntleroy's wife—was a Spanish lady of high temper and ungoverned will, and I find that whenever I attempt anything like coercion with Rosamond, she becomes absolutely savage!"

"But, Lady Osprey," faltered poor Dora, "I can not possibly accept the position."

"Why not?" questioned Lady Osprey, knitting her black brows until they became one level line, and evincing some displeasure.

"I could not teach Lady Rosamond Trente," explained the girl, coloring deeply. "I am not educated. I have no accomplishments."

"That signifies nothing," said Lady Osprey, imperiously. "I can easily engage masters for all that sort of thing. What I want of you is to teach my poor child the gentle graces of life, the habits of civilization. I do not know what your birth may be—it is certainly not patrician."

"I am an American farmer's daughter," said Dora, quietly.

"But," went on Lady Osprey, "you have the soft, gracious manner of a lady. I think that you would exercise a favorable influence on Rosamond, if not as a governess, as a companion. At all events, she likes you, and she is as chary of her fancies as if they were Koh-i-noor diamonds. Augusta, her sister, has no influence whatever over her, and it is only at times that I can exert my authority. What do you say, Dora? Will you undertake the charge?"

Dora lifted her calm, brave eyes to Lady Osprey's aristocratic old face.

"If you wish me to do so, I will try it, Lady Osprey," said she; "but if I fail—"

"If you fail," said Lady Osprey, with a shrug of her shoulders, "you will not be the first failure. I have paid Miss Goodall, and dismissed her. She is already on her way to the railway station at Monmouth. She is a good, honest creature, but she has no tact, and, with the best intentions in the world, she was ruining Rosamond."

As she spoke, the door was pushed softly open, and the dark-eyed culprit herself appeared.

"Rosamond," said Lady Osprey, "when shall I learn you always to knock at a door before you enter?"

But Lady Rosamond, without paying any attention to her aunt's chiding words, looked from one to the other of the two figures in the window.

"Well?" said she, eagerly.

"Dora thinks she will try you," said Lady Osprey; "but remember—"

Lady Rosamond walked up to Dora, and gave her a kiss.

"Good!" said she. "I think I can behave myself—with you. At all events, I will try. But, Aunt Aurora, I may

take her out into the pleasaunce? Lessons don't begin until to-morrow, do they? And the twilight is so lovely out there."

Lady Osprey nodded to Dora. "Go with her," said she, in a low tone. "Win her to you all that you can."

And presently Dora found herself seated in a low, rustic summer-house, with a thatched roof and cedar columns, all wreathed about with clematis and honeysuckle, with Lady Rosamond Trente sitting on the grass at her side.

"Now, tell me truly," said Lady Rosamond, abruptly, "what you think of us all."

"What I think?" repeats Dora, in some confusion.

"Yes."

"Lady Osprey is like a queen," said Dora, timidly.

"That's just my idea," declared Lady Rosamond.

"And Lady Augusta Trente is very beautiful."

"Yes," nodded Lady Rosamond; "but you won't like her. She is like a tiger-cat, very beautiful and very treacherous. For myself—I hate her!"

"Oh, Lady Rosamond—your sister!"

"My sister," admitted the child, with an impatient toss of her jet-black mane of hair. "There is no reason why sisters shouldn't dislike each other heartily. She never cared for me—and I hate her. But she is to be married in a month."

"Married!"

"And she will go to live at Branchley Manor. They like her there—Lady Branchley is always sending for her—and I am sure they're welcome to her.

"Married to—Sir Basil Branchley?" uttered Dora, faintly.

"Bless your heart, no," said Lady Rosamond. "Sir Basil is married already, only his wife never shows."

"Never *shows*?"

"She has run away from him," said Lady Rosamond, indifferently, "or she is shut up in a lunatic asylum, or something. At all events, they never speak of her. By the way, *she* was an American," opening her big black eyes very wide. "Did you ever meet her there, Dora?"

"I?"

"Why not? I don't suppose America is such a very big place—at least the habitable parts of it. They say she was a very great beauty, this Lady Branchley, but a very wicked woman."

"Was she?" Dora sat there quite pale and rigid, with the blood tingling in every vein, and her heart seeming to rise into her very throat.

"She broke Sir Basil's heart," nodded Lady Rosamond. "She ran away and left him—and she left her child, too."

Dora was silent. She could not have spoken for the blindness that came before her eyes, the chill at her heart.

"He went back to America for it," said Lady Rosamond. "And where do you think she had sent it? To the poor-house! Oh, such a little beauty of a child! I've seen it at the manor house. And I'm going again, to stay a month, when Augusta is married to Mr. Julian Branchley."

"Are you?" Dora spoke low and hoarsely.

"It's a beautiful old place," said Lady Rosamond, sitting with her elbows on her knees. "With the grounds sloping down to the Usk River, and a little boat that I can row myself, and the jolliest, ghostly old chapel that you ever saw. The butler says that there's the ghost of an old monk sits there of moonlight nights and tells his beads; but I know better. I sat up there all one night, and there wasn't a sign of a ghost. Wasn't Augusta frightened, though, when Priscilla, the maid, went upstairs to do my hair, and I wasn't in the bed. There I was, curled up in one of the old Gothic seats of the chapel, fast asleep! But there—I've talked enough about myself and Augusta; now let's hear about you."

Dora tried to smile. "There is nothing to tell," said she.

"But there *is*," said Lady Rosamond, impatiently. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Nineteen!" echoed Lady Rosamond. "And married already."

"Married," said Dora, quietly, "and widowed."

Lady Rosamond looked with some awe at the sweet, pale young face.

"Dora," said she, "did you love your husband very much?"

Dora sprang to her feet, clasping her hands over her heart. "Love him!" she cried. "God knows I did. Oh, I loved him so dearly! Lady Rosamond," turning with passion-glittering eyes to the girl, "you must not ask me about these things; I can not endure it. Do you hear?"

"I hear," said Lady Rosamond, solemnly. "All girls do not love their husbands so, though. Augusta does not love Julian Branchley—she is only going to marry him because he is rich, and will make her the lady of Branchley some day."

Dora turned sharply upon her young companion. "It is only Sir Basil's wife who can be the lady of Branchley."

"Sir Basil will not live long," said Lady Rosamond, shrewd-

ly. "At least, that is what people say. And he has no son to inherit his title."

"He *has* a son!" cried out Dora. "Who dares to say that he has not?"

"No," said Lady Rosamond, shaking her head; "there *was* a son—but he is dead. Sir Basil's wife knows where he is buried, but no one else does. There is only little Helen now. So of course, when Sir Basil dies, his brother will be Sir Julian and Augusta will be the lady of Branchley. She will like that," added the child; "for Augusta delights in fine dresses, and carriages, and diamonds; and we are poor, Augusta and I. Aunt Aurora gives us a home, but we have no money. When I am a woman grown, I mean to publish a novel or write a grand poem, or carve out a statue, or something, and make a great fortune for myself. I have heard of women doing so—and I have read about them in books. But Augusta is different. *She* thinks girls ought to get married. She is always telling me that if I do this thing, and that thing, and the other thing, I shall never get a husband. As if I cared whether I did or not. If I really should fall in love—oh, that would be another thing. And I don't think Augusta *loves* Julian Branchley!"

"You are only a child," said Dora, still with the same sharp pain at her heart. "What do you know about such things?"

"I have eyes, though," said Lady Rosamond. "Ay, and ears, and common sense. I am in my teens, too; I was thirteen in April; and I haven't played with dolls for a whole year. I know who Augusta *does* love," she added, lowering her voice.

"Who is it?" For the life of her, Dora could not help asking the question, although she dreaded, with a sort of sick terror, to hear the answer.

"Sir Basil!"

"Child, you are mistaken," cried Dora, seizing the girl's arm. "Sir Basil Branchley is a married man."

"But he wasn't, though, when Augusta first fell in love with him," said Rosamond, gravely. "She used to talk to Aunt Aurora about him, and cry—when they both thought I was sound asleep in bed. But I wasn't; I was listening at the door. Oh!" added Lady Rosamond Trente, with a keen appreciation of the ridiculous, "it was *such* fun. If ever I am in love—and mind you, Dora, I never mean to be, if I can help it—I won't make such a fool of myself as Augusta did. But, Dora—about yourself. Did you ever have any children?"

“Yes,” Dora answered, almost inaudibly.

“What has become of them?”

But Dora turned her face away with a low, anguished cry.

“Then they are dead,” said Lady Rosamond, in a low, awe-stricken voice. “Poor little Dora;” and she stroked the short curling rings of Dora’s golden hair, which was just beginning to grow out into a manageable length. “Why, you are only a child yourself! Why did they cut your hair off? Were you ill?”

“I had a fever,” said Dora.

“You are shuddering. Are you cold? Then we will go back to the school-room; there is always such a cheerful wood fire in the school-room at this time of night. And we’ll ring for tea and lights,” added Lady Rosamond, in a caressing sort of way, as if Dora were several years younger than herself, “and we’ll look over all the books that we are to read together. So I know we shall be happy, Dora, you and I.”

“You are very good to me, Lady Rosamond,” said Dora, looking wistfully up into the child’s great, pitying eyes.

“I like you, you see,” said Lady Rosamond Trente; “you are young, and pretty, and soft—not cold and granite hard like old Goodall. I think—yes, I’m almost *sure*—that I like you better than I do the pony and Henrico.”

CHAPTER XXXII.

LADY AUGUSTA’S CONFIDENCES.

OLD Lady Osprey was surprised and delighted at the docility with which little Lady Rosamond settled down under the rule of her new governess. There was one or two outbreaks, at the bottom of which were Henrico and the pony—but, upon the whole, Lady Rosamond was improved. Dora’s gentleness seemed to impress her, and Dora’s companionship won her away from the masculine pursuits which had so shocked and scandalized her elder sister.

“I think, Dora,” said the old lady one day, “that Rosamond would apply herself with more energy to her music and French and general literature lessons if you would bring yourself down to her level, intellectually speaking, and take lessons with her. It might be a little monotonous, just at first, but—”

“Oh, Lady Osprey,” cried Dora, “I should be so delighted!”

For there was the yearning sensation at her heart that if she could acquire some of these much-coveted accomplishments,

and make herself even like the soft-voiced, richly cultured English women who surrounded her, she would be more worthy of her lost husband, ay, even though she should never see him more! And so she devoted herself with feverish earnestness to the daily lessons—and Lady Rosamond Trente, catching the magnetic influence, improved to a degree that fairly amazed her aunt.

“I believe our little Rosa is going to be a genius after all,” said Lady Osprey.

The very fact of her being so near Branchley Manor House thrilled Dora’s whole being with electric power.

“I wonder if *he* knows it?” she asked herself. “I wonder if no secret instinct tells him that the poor forsaken girl whom he once loved so dearly is near him? He used to tell me that he could feel my presence, even if he did not see it; he said once, that my footstep walking over his grave would stir him into life, even though he lay confined and shrouded. I used to laugh at him then, and think he was absurdly romantic and high-strung. Alas! how differently things seem to me now. Well, his words have come true: my worn and weary footsteps are walking over his grave—the grave of his dead love—but it returns no answering thrill. Ah, how he loved me! And I—what would I not give for one of those tender looks, one of those passionate caresses, which only wearied me then?”

Of her children she never allowed herself to think; she felt that all such memories must be resolutely banished, if she wished to keep herself from going mad. But the very sight of a little fair-haired child, playing on the way-side, brought the quick tears to her eyes; the sound of a baby’s voice put her into a tremble—and she would walk half a mile around by the western gate to avoid passing by the little red-brick lodge where the keeper’s wife was wont to stand in the door-way with a dimpled little one in her arms. Lady Rosamond Trente, who was quick to observe, said once:

“I thought you were fond of children, Dora.”

“So I am,” said Dora, sadly.

“Then why do you always avoid the little ones we meet in our walks?”

“Because—oh, Lady Rosamond!—because the sight of a child brings back the memory of my own little lost ones,” wailed Dora, with a shower of tears.

Lady Rosamond kissed her, and said nothing; but after that she was especially careful to select the walks where they were least likely to meet little children.

From Lady Augusta she sedulously held herself aloof—but

through some unaccountable caprice, the bride-elect seemed to take as sudden a fancy to the pale-faced little governess as had her impetuous younger sister, sent for her in grave consultation to the sewing-room, and even asked her advice about matters connected with the all-important bridal *trousseau*.

"I should so like to have you see Branchley Manor House," said Lady Augusta, with an air of benign patronage. "It is a grand old place—altogether the finest in the neighborhood. No—don't go away. You are not disturbing me the least bit in the world; and Rosa is quite absorbed in that book of hers. I declare, Mrs. Bracy, you are making quite a civilized creature of our little gypsy princess. But about Branchley—of course I shall have Aunt Aurora and Rosamond there a great deal, when I am married, and—equally, of course—you will come with them."

"I—I would prefer to remain here," stammered poor Dora, feeling a cold chill creep over her; "I am not used to grand company, and—"

"That is all nonsense," said Lady Augusta; "no one will take any notice of you, you are only Lady Rosamond Trente's governess, you know."

"Only a governess!" vaguely echoed Dora.

"And I should like you to see dear Lady Branchley, and Julian, and little Helen. Of course, you know I'm going to be a sort of step-mother."

"A step-mother?"

"Well—a step-aunt; it's the same sort of thing!" laughed Lady Augusta, who was looking very lovely in a maize-colored cashmere, trimmed with swan's-down, and buttoned down the front with tiny knobs of amber; "for, of course, I shall endeavor to take the place of mother to poor, dear Basil's motherless child."

Dora sat with her large, wistful eyes fixed on Lady Augusta's face—eyes as wild and pitiful as those of some hunted fawn who is transfixed by the cruel arrow of the hunter, and can neither turn nor fly.

"It's a sad story," added Lady Augusta, "and of course it's one that we don't talk of to everybody. But you seem almost like one of ourselves," kindly touching Dora's shoulder with her amber satin fan, "and you must know it all, sooner or later. I suppose Rosa has told you of—of Sir Basil's wife? Rosa is such a little chatter-box!"

Dora inclined her head; she dared not look up, but she could feel the crimson blood glowing in her cheek like liquid fire.

"It was a dreadful family tragedy," sighed Lady Augusta. "Poor Basil—no one that sees him now, gloomy, taciturn, and absent, can form any idea of what he used to be before that unlucky voyage to America—so brilliant—so full of life and spirits—so brave and ambitious, but now—oh, he is a ruin—a complete wreck! It was all that wretched American marriage. You see, he met a coarse, uneducated woman there. She was a servant at one of the hotels, or something—and in a moment of sheer madness he married her. How it was we don't know. It may be possible that she worked on his chivalric feelings—Basil was always a sort of Don Quixote—or it may be that she was really pretty, and attracted his fancy. But he married her."

"And brought her home?" Dora questioned, with a calm self-possession which surprised herself.

"Home!" sharply echoed Lady Augusta. "That woman—to Branchley Manor House—to his mother? Certainly he did not?"

"No?"

"He remained in America more than two years, writing various excuses for his long delay—and then when poor Sir Reginald's sudden death summoned him imperatively back, he came—without her."

Dora drew a long shuddering breath.

"Of course it was a relief to leave her behind," said Lady Augusta. "The spell was over—the infatuation gone. But, all the same, poor Basil's life was wrecked."

"And how?" Dora could not prevent herself from exclaiming, with a bitterness which made Lady Augusta open her eyes in amazement. "Do you suppose there was no shipwreck, then?"

"Oh, hers?" Lady Augusta shrugged her shoulders superciliously. "It isn't at all likely, you know, that she had any very sensitive feelings or delicate susceptibilities. I dare say he made her a very liberal allowance, and would be doing so still if she had not put it out of his power by running away from him."

"Indeed?"

"It seems almost incredible, doesn't it? But Sir Basil has the dear little girl—a perfect cherub. All that we regret is her resemblance to the unfortunate mother."

"Unfortunate, indeed!" said Dora, in a low voice.

"Ah, your sympathies are aroused," said Lady Augusta. "And it is no wonder. But when you have seen a little more of the world, you will be less soft-hearted, Mrs. Bracy."

"But the child!" gasped Dora, leaning eagerly forward. "Tell me of *her*! You see," feeling it necessary to offer some excuse, as Lady Augusta's surprised eyes were raised to her face, "I lost a little girl of my own once, and I never can hear of children without being interested. You say she is pretty?"

"More than pretty," said Lady Augusta Trente. "She is as beautiful as an angel—a little golden-haired prattling thing that would win any heart. Lady Branchley dotes upon her; even Julian, who cares little for children in the abstract, is fascinated by her pretty little ways, and worships her, like all the rest. Oh, you must see her, Dora. We will all drive over to the manor house to-morrow, Aunt Aurora, Rosa, you and I. It will be a pleasant surprise for Julian. He returns from London to-morrow, where he has been to see about those tiresome marriage settlements, and Lady Branchley will be delighted, I am sure."

But Dora shrunk back, deathly pale.

"I can not!" cried she, "I am not equal to the exertion of meeting strangers."

"My dear child, what folly all this is!" exclaimed Lady Augusta Trente, half amazed at what she deemed Dora's nonsense, half gratified at the trepidation with which her account of the Branchley splendors had evidently inspired her sister's young governess. "There will be no strangers to meet. Lady Branchley is all unassuming gentleness and grace—and dear Julian will be sure to receive graciously any friend of *mine*," with a little conscious smile. "And Rosa will show you the chapel and the old Benedictine ruins, and—"

"You are very kind," reiterated Dora, with a wild, frightened look in her eyes. "But I prefer not to go."

"Oh, if you are so determined about it," said Lady Augusta, evidently somewhat piqued, "of course I shall not insist upon your going. It is merely a matter of taste."

But she questioned Lady Rosamond as to her governess's strange ways when Dora had gone for her usual lonely walk under the branching limes at sunset.

"Is Mrs. Bracy such a baby that she is actually afraid of strangers?" said she.

"Afraid?—no," said Lady Rosamond.

"Then why will she not go to Branchley with us to-morrow? I have rather taken up a fancy for her to go, and—"

"And won't she?"

"No; she positively declines."

"But she *shall* go," asserted Lady Rosamond, frowning in

her solemn Spanish fashion. "Look here, Augusta, she *must* see the hobgoblin old chapel, and the wainscoted corridors, and dear little Nelly, and that delightful old mother-in-law of yours!"

"But you can't take her against her will."

"Can not I, though? You will see," said Lady Rosamond, with a mischievous twinkle in her great eyes.

And the next day, when Lady Rosamond and her governess went out for their afternoon drive, they chanced to overtake Lady Augusta near the lodge gate.

"Jump in, Augusta!" cried out the little hoiden. "We're only going a little way."

And she put her head out to speak a low word or two of direction to the coachman on the box.

The October sunshine was like golden balm—the trees, just yellowing in their autumnal beauty, were fresh and lovely still—and Dora Bracy, wrapped in her own thoughts, never noticed which road the driver had taken, until, sweeping up through a magnificent avenue of old trees, she caught sight of the deep blue Usk on one side, and on the other became conscious of the stately front of an old cream-tinted house with mullioned casements, and a paved court in front, where a marble Diana leaned from her glittering marble pedestal, and a fountain, surrounded by a belt of glowing scarlet geraniums, threw a veil of shining mist into the golden air.

She started up with a cry.

"Where am I?" she exclaimed. "Surely—surely this is Branchley Manor House?"

"Of course it is Branchley Manor House," said Lady Rosamond, laughing exultantly. "Augusta's new home. And here is Julian coming out to welcome us—and dear old Lady Branchley!"

Dora sat as pale and still as if she were petrified into marble; the cold beads of perspiration broke out upon her forehead, and her heart seemed to beat with low muffled strokes. She scarcely moved as the formal words of introduction were spoken. Her cold hand scarcely touched that of Julian Branchley as he courteously assisted his cousin's governess to alight from the carriage. Like one walking in a dream, she crossed the threshold of Branchley Manor House, vaguely wondering what would happen next. As she saw her own reflection in a chance mirror, it seemed to her like that of some white, shrinking ghost.

Lady Rosamond pressed eagerly forward, leaving, as she

herself expressed it, Julian and her sister to their "lover-like fooleries."

"And little Helen!" she cried out, impatiently, looking around. "Dear Lady Branchley, where is she?"

"Yes," said Lady Augusta, languidly, as she took off her plumed hat, "where is my little Nelly?"

While Dora stood by, trembling and leaning against one of the great pedestals which supported gilded jardinières of rare exotics. Oh, God! would the sick suspense never end? As if it mattered to *them* where little Helen was, while she, the mother, stood breathless and pale, awaiting the presence of the child she had not seen for well-nigh a year!

Lady Branchley looked surprised.

"My dear girls," said she, "is it possible that you do not know? Though, of course, it is only half an hour since I sent Simon off to The Chestnuts with a note, and he could hardly have reached it before you had driven away. Oh, Augusta, I am so sorry for your sake and Julian's—but you know how moody and fitful he is—and when he once takes a fancy into his head, it is utterly useless to try to dispel it! We tried our best, indeed—indeed we did, but it was all to no avail."

Lady Augusta looked at her future mother-in-law with a puzzled face.

"Do you mean—" she began, and then stopped.

"He has gone, dear Basil. He has taken Helen and her nurse and is *en route* for Switzerland and Lake Como, where—"

But here a frightened cry from the little Lady Rosamond attracted all attention. The governess had fainted beside the gilded jardinières.

"Poor thing!" said Lady Augusta, carelessly. "But she is never very strong. Priscilla will bring some restoratives—and as for you, Rosa, stand back and give her a little air. So Basil has gone away—and only three weeks before our wedding? How very, very strange!"

And the crimson flush of gratified pride mounted to Lady Augusta Trente's cheeks as she thought how probable it was that Sir Basil could not bring himself to stand calmly by and witness her wedding ceremony.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MOTHER AND CHILD.

THE wedding of Julian Branchley and Lady Augusta Trente passed off brilliantly, in spite of the momentary gossip caused

by Sir Basil's sudden defection. Lady Rosamond, in white tulle and snowy syringas, officiated as one of the bride-maids, and apparently enjoyed the whole affair intensely.

"Of course, I never mean to be married myself," said the girl. "But it's rather fun than otherwise to assist at other people's weddings."

And when the young married pair came home at Christmas from their continental tour, the manor house was filled with gay guests and decorated with Christmas greens for their better welcome.

Lady Osprey and her younger niece were, of course, among the invited guests, and with the latter—by Lady Branchley's especial request—came Mrs. Bracy, the governess.

"She is a beautiful creature," said Lady Branchley, confidentially to Lady Osprey. "And that gentle, composed manner of hers is, to me, especially charming. I do not know when I have seen any one who has more completely captivated me."

"She is beautiful," said Lady Osprey. "More particularly since her lovely golden hair has grown out so luxuriantly and her color has come back. But still there is something strange about her."

"Yes," said Lady Branchley, "I have noticed that. Depend upon it, there has been a time in her life in which she has experienced some terrible nervous shock. She looks at you sometimes with a wild, startled glance which is quite unaccountable on any other grounds. Do you know her history?"

"Only that she has undergone much trouble," said Lady Osprey. "Her husband, I think, has deserted her; but she is very sensitive on the subject, and I have never ventured to allude to it since she first came to me. And she has lost two infants, she tells me."

"Poor child," said Lady Branchley; "she is very young to have seen so much sorrow."

And the first night at the manor house, when Dora came down-stairs to the drawing-room, in her plain black silk dress with her golden braids filleted with black ribbon, and a gold cross—Lady Rosamond's Christmas gift—hanging at her throat, Lady Branchley advanced kindly toward her, with her white patrician hand held out.

"You are very welcome, Mrs. Bracy," said she. "I hope often to see you a guest at Branchley Manor House."

The startled look came into Dora's eyes; she shrunk back, without taking Lady Branchley's proffered hand.

“Ah!” said she, in a tone which was half a sob, “you do not know who I am.”

“Lady Osprey has told me all,” said the elder lady, graciously. “We all of us have troubles to bear—and yours, let us hope, are over now.”

“They will never be over,” said Dora, sadly. “But I thank you, Lady Branchley, for your kindness. I have come here because Lady Rosamond and her aunt insisted upon it. I shall trespass upon your hospitality no longer than I can help. In the meantime, pray—pray forgive me for coming here at all.”

“It is a transgression which is easily forgiven,” said Lady Branchley, with a smile. But there was something in the friendless girl’s manner that at once piqued and interested her—a mingled air of defiance and entreaty—a look that was neither terror nor appeal, but a pitiful intermixture of both.

She sat there in the brilliant drawing-room that night, like a little pale shadow, shrinking from notice behind the friendly shelter of the amber satin curtains. How luxurious was this home, which might have been hers—how sweet the breath of its hot-house flowers, how summer-like the air of the steam-heated rooms. The walls were hung with wreaths of mistletoe and scarlet holly berries; fires, of some delicately perfumed wood, blazed under the slender columns of the marble mantels, and clusters of giant ferns and fruit-laden orange and lemon-trees were placed in all the angles of the room, so that one might easily forget the frozen wind and piled-up masses of snow without, and fancy one’s self in the tropics. While, through the parted draperies of pale yellow velvet at the further end of the apartment, Dora could see the blossoming perspective of the great conservatory, with tiny lamps, swinging like miniature planets, among the palm leaves and acacia thickets. Servants moved noiselessly here and there; the wax candles in the great bronze chandelier shone softly, and there was an indescribable air of luxury and refinement about the place that Dora had never known or dreamed of.

This, then, was her husband’s home. And a sort of chill seemed to paralyze her heart as she remembered the old farmhouse on the Saratoga Road where she herself had struggled up from a forlorn girlhood to still more neglected woman’s estate. What a contrast!

“And in spite of all that, he loved me,” she thought, with wild, wistful eyes fixed on the brilliant scene. “He loved me—and I was mad enough to fling his love away!”

While Lady Augusta, the bride, in her dress of ivory white

silk, with pearls glistening around her throat, and white camellia buds in her hair, was doing the honors of her new home with an easy air of proprietorship which put Lady Branchley herself quite in the background.

Presently Lady Rosamond, in her white frock and broad ribbon sash, ran up to Dora's secluded corner.

"Look at Augusta!" cried she; "only look at her, Dora! Isn't she playing grand lady to her heart's content? It's what she always coveted, and now she has got it! But we've prepared *such* a surprise for Lady Branchley, Augusta and I—a real Christmas surprise!"

"What is it?" asked Dora, trying to feign an interest in the child's glad absorption.

"It's—oh, hush! There she comes now."

The door opened noiselessly—the solemn footman announced in a stentorian tone:

"Miss Branchley!"

And Dora, looking around in expectation of beholding another of the aristocratic female relatives of the Branchley family-tree, beheld a beautiful little golden-tressed fairy of scarcely three summers, with laughing dark eyes, cheeks dyed pink with happy excitement, and a wreath of rosebuds on her head. Her dress, of embroidered India muslin, shone and glimmered like woven threads of pearl—her tiny feet, clad in white kid boots, buttoned with ivory, seemed to dance over the threshold as she flew to Lady Branchley's arms, and there was a general exclamation of surprise and delight at the brilliant little apparition.

"Oh, look! look!" cried Lady Rosamond, unable to restrain her rapture. "It's Helen!"

But Dora needed no human voice to tell her that she was in the presence of her child. She had studied those dark, radiant eyes through too many long, melancholy hours, to be mistaken in their expression now; she had hung, enraptured, too often on the tones of the child's voice, not to recognize its accents now. She had started up, with a face as pale as death, echoing Lady Rosamond's word:

"Helen!"

With a suddenness of motion entirely at variance with her usual quiet reticence of manner, Dora Bracy broke into the middle of the group, and flung herself on her knees before the child, who was enthroned upon Lady Branchley's lap.

"Nelly!" she cried, holding out both her hands, with an ashen white face, and eyes that glittered wildly. "Nelly!"

But little Helen turned her face away and buried it in her grandmother's neck.

"Go away!" said she. "I don't know who you are! I want grandmamma!"

Dora turned away, with a sudden, silent shrinking—a pain like the prick of a dagger at her heart. This was the last brimming drop in her cup of anguish—that her own child should turn away from her to Lady Branchley's arms.

Hurrying through the guests, she made her way out upon the balconies, where the pale moon was shining on snowy ledges and solemn evergreens, and laid her throbbing forehead against the cold, ivy-mantled walls.

"Oh, my child!" she murmured. "My little Nelly! mine no more! Oh, baby Walter, you never would have turned from me so. You would have known me and held out your little arms to me, if I had come to you from the end of the world."

Just then the satin-hung casement close to her opened, and Lady Branchley laid her hand softly on her shoulder.

"Mrs. Bracy," said she, "pray do not allow yourself to be hurt by a child's unaccountable caprices. Come in out of this bitter cold air. Nelly will kiss you now."

"Nelly will kiss you now," echoed the child, with solemn brown eyes lifted to poor Dora's face—and she came in, shivering and pale, to the embrace to which Lady Branchley had bribed the child with a handful of bonbons. The touch of the child's soft cheek against hers seemed to thrill her through and through.

"Nelly," she whispered. "Sweet little Nelly—darling treasure—will you love me?"

"Yes," the child answered, intent upon her sugared caraway seeds.

"Will you give me kisses whenever I ask for them?"

"Yes," assented Nelly, struggling impatiently in her grasp.

"Let me get down. I want to go to grandmamma."

And the wretched mother put down her child again, with a sigh that was akin to a groan. Her child—and yet a stranger to her!

"Wasn't it a charming surprise?" she could hear Lady Augusta saying to a plump old dowager in maroon velvet and diamonds. "You see, dear Sir Basil concluded to go on to Egypt with a party who are looking for the sources of the Nile, or something—and, of course, it was entirely impracticable to take Helen with him. So he sent her back to England in charge of Paolo, the courier, and Agnes, the nurse, dear

little thing, and she arrived not two hours ago. Julian and I knew all about it, of course, but we determined to keep our own secret, and give dear mamma a delightful surprise; and altogether it is a success. By the way, Mrs. Bracy," turning carelessly to Dora, who sat close by, "how do you like my brother-in-law's child? Is she not all that we have painted her?"

"She is very beautiful," said Dora, in a low voice.

But that night, long after the mantle of silence and sleep had descended upon all the towers of Branchley Manor House, Dora sat at her casement, looking out upon the snow-veiled scene and thinking of life as it was—and life as it might have been.

She was still sitting there, chilled and pale, in her dressing-gown, with the fire dying into white drifts of ashes at her feet, and the faint crimson of the wintery dawn beginning to irradiate the eastern horizon, when there was a hurried noise of footsteps in the hall, and Lady Rosamond Trente, wrapped in a shawl, with her long black hair streaming down her back, rushed into the room.

"Dora," said she, panting with terror and the haste she had made, "come to Aunt Aurora at once. I—I am so frightened!"

"Is she ill?" questioned Dora, starting with alacrity to her feet.

"Yes—yes—only come quickly. I don't think Jones understands what to do. I have sent for Augusta, and Jennings has ridden off for the doctor, but it takes so long to wake people up, and—"

Her words died away into hysterical sobs, as she hurried along the passages, dragging Dora after her.

Poor Lady Osprey's room was a scene of hopeless dismay and confusion. She lay quite silent and insensible in her bed, with her gray head supported on the arm of Jones, the maid. Lady Augusta, in a dressing-robe of pale-pink cashmere, stood sobbing and shivering close to her, and Lady Branchley was stooping over her, vainly trying to force some restorative between her closed teeth.

One glance was quite enough for Dora. She put her arms tenderly about the weeping Lady Rosamond, and gently drew her away.

"If she would only speak to me once!" wailed the girl. "If she would only look at me!"

"She will never speak again, dear Rosamond," said Dora, in a low tone. "She is dead."

For the trumpet-call had sounded suddenly in the night, and Lady Osprey, full of years and honors, had gone home.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DAILY TRIALS.

“Of course there can be no sort of doubt about it,” said Lady Augusta Branchley. “Rosamond must stay here.”

Lady Rosamond Trente, still dressed in the deep mourning robes of crape and bombazine that she had worn at her aunt’s funeral, looked up with a quivering lip and tear-drenched eyes.

“I would rather go back to The Chestnuts,” said she.

“But you can not,” said Lady Augusta, a little impatiently. “The Chestnuts is ours no longer—it has passed into the possession of Uncle Osprey’s heirs-at-law, and is to be sold at auction as soon as possible. You have no home, Rosamond, except with me.”

“You will try to be happy here, dear Rosamond?” caressed Lady Branchley, who held one of the girl’s cold hands in hers; “of course we can not expect to take the place of your dear aunt, but we love you dearly, and—”

“I shall be living on charity!” cried out Rosamond, passionately.

“Charity? What nonsense!” sharply spoke Lady Augusta. “Nothing can be more proper and appropriate. Julian himself suggested it. My home shall be yours, of course—at least until you come of age.”

“If I were a grown woman like Dora Bracy,” burst out poor Lady Rosamond, “I could earn my own living! Oh, I wish I were a laborer’s daughter, and then I could go out to service.”

“Rosamond, I think you are a little crazy,” said Lady Augusta. “Be thankful that I am able to offer you such a home, before you burst out into vain and idle repinings like these.”

“I shall not stay here unless Dora stays with me,” said Lady Rosamond.

“Of course Mrs. Bracy will stay with you,” said Lady Augusta Branchley. “And I do not entertain the least doubt that she will be very glad to continue on in so desirable a situation.”

Lady Rosamond went straight to her governess.

“Dora,” said she, “Augusta says I have no home, and that

I must stay on here; but I will not, unless you will promise to stay with me. Will you?"

The startled look which Lady Branchley had so often observed and marveled at came into Theodora's eyes. She paused and hesitated for a moment or two.

"Tell me," persisted Lady Rosamond, "will you?"

"For the present, yes," Dora answered, slowly. "Why not? Yes, I will stay with you."

And when Lady Rosamond had gone back to her sister, Dora took her hat and sacque—a pretty, close-fitting sealskin, which Lady Osprey had bestowed upon her only a few days before she died—and hurried out into the grounds, where an orange sunset was shining over all the wintry world, and the cedars tossed their black-green crests at every blast of wind.

"It is fate!" cried she, wildly "and I will strive against it no longer. I will stay on at Branchley Manor House; but the instant my husband turns his footsteps homeward, I shall flee once more out into the world. He need not fear that I shall ever again force my unwelcome presence upon him."

And so Dora Bracy became a member of the family at Branchley Manor House, finding some salve for her bleeding heart-wounds in little Helen's growing beauty and intelligence, and in Lady Rosamond Trent's devoted affection. Sir Basil Branchley's daughter had become fond of the pale, quiet governess—so demonstratively so, that Agnes, the nurse, became passionately jealous.

"If my little lady is going to prefer that Mrs. Bracy to me in everything," said Mrs. Agnes, indignantly, "I don't see as there is any occasion for my remaining in the family."

"Neither do I," said Lady Augusta Branchley, who had chanced to overhear the pert remark. "You may consider yourself discharged, Agnes."

"Please, my lady," said Agnes, rather taken aback, "if Mrs. Bracy has been making any complaints about me—"

"Set your mind at rest, Agnes," said Lady Augusta, with the imperial air which she knew so well how to assume, "no complaints have been made; but I think Mrs. Bracy's influence is more beneficial over Miss Branchley than your own."

"If you please, my lady," said Agnes, with one last struggle in her own behoof, "I was engaged by Sir Basil himself."

"And you are dismissed by me," said Lady Augusta; "so let there be an end of the matter."

Agnes burst into tears, and retired at once, while Lady Augusta went to the boudoir, where Lady Rosamond was

practicing her scales, and Dora was dreaming over an open book.

"Dora," said she, "I have discharged Helen's nurse. The woman was really getting too insolent and domineering for endurance."

The book slid from Dora's hands to the floor.

"Oh!" cried she, with radiant face, and eyes full of sparkling lights, "if I might only have the charge of her."

"Would you like it?" said Lady Augusta.

"Oh, so much!" cried Dora.

"Well, it is just what I was going to ask of you," smiled Lady Augusta. "I know you are fond of children—and, really, Nell idolizes you, and there is Sarah for all the nurse-maid part of the work. Agnes is a common sort of a person, and I think Helen needs a more refined influence."

With this new order of arrangements, a sort of subdued happiness seemed to pass into poor Theodora's storm-tossed life. The dark hours still hung over her—the hours in which she cried aloud to Heaven to give her back her husband's forfeited love, her little lost boy, whose blue eyes haunted her like a dream—but her nature was of the ivy sort that clings to whatever is nearest, and little Helen's beauty and winning ways, most of all, her demonstrative affection, were like a balm to the mother's sore heart. There were times when life at Branchley Manor House became irksome to her—times in which Lady Augusta's cool patronage galled her. Mr. Branchley's critical allusions to his absent brother brought the angry crimson to her cheek. More than once, too, she was compelled to sit silently by and hear herself discussed in terms which were far from pleasant. One occasion in particular branded itself into her memory with indissoluble distinctness. They had been looking at a photograph of Sir Basil, which had been sent home from abroad, and—strange conjunction of circumstances—it had been the soft hand of Sir Basil's wife which had wiped the tears from his mother's eyes.

"Mamma," said Lady Augusta, jealously, "why are you crying? Julian is with you still."

Lady Branchley tried to smile.

"My darling," she said, faintly, "Julian is a dear and cherished son—but he is not Basil, my first-born boy."

"Neither has he flung away his life and prospects like Basil," retorted Lady Augusta, with a red spot kindling in either cheek.

"After all, Augusta," interposed Lady Rosamond, who was sitting on the floor playing jackstones with Helen, "you

are reaping the benefits of Basil's folly. For if he hadn't ruined himself with that American wife, you wouldn't have been queening it at Branchley Manor House, as you are doing now."

"Pshaw!" ejaculated Lady Augusta, contemptuously.

"Or if the American wife hadn't run away and left him," went on relentless Lady Rosamond, "he would perhaps have brought her here—"

"Never!" hotly interposed Lady Augusta.

"And she would have been the lady of the manor instead of you," added Lady Rosamond. "Take care, Nell; you stirred the pile then! It's my turn, now."

"Fancy a Yankee milk-maid domineering over us all!" laughed Lady Augusta, in no sweetly mirthful mood.

"I do wonder what she was like," said Lady Rosamond, suddenly straightening herself up, and looking at Lady Branchley. "Did you never see any picture of her, Lady Branchley?"

Dora rose, and walked hurriedly across the room to the window.

"Lady Branchley," said she, "do you think it is too early for Helen's walk?"

"Oh, quite," said the elder lady, serenely. "Wait half an hour, Dora—the sun will be lower then and the air cooler. No, my dear,"—to Lady Rosamond—"I never did. Basil wished to show me her picture once, but it was when my heart was sorest, and my feelings in most acute rebellion against his foreign marriage. I spoke suddenly, and alas! unreflectingly, and said that I cared to see neither picture nor original. He never offered to show it to me again—my poor boy!"

"I suppose she must have been wonderfully beautifully," said Lady Rosamond, gathering up the pile of jackstones and scrambling to her feet.

"She was, if Basil's word is to be credited," sighed Lady Branchley. "And I have often since said to myself that there must have been something noble and winning about her or *he* never would have loved her so! Dora, my child, you are bending too closely over that worsted work. Do you find your eyes are becoming strained, or is the canvas too fine?"

Poor Dora! A fawn, hunted to the death, may have turned upon her pursuers with something of the agonized look which she lifted to Lady Branchley's sweet, compassionate face.

"I do not think I am well," said she, starting to her feet.

"I will go upstairs, please, Lady Branchley, and lie down."

"By all means, my dear," said Lady Branchley. "I fear you have been rather overtasking yourself lately with Rosamond and Helen both. Indeed, I sometimes think that perhaps we had better engage a separate nursery governess for Helen, if—"

"Oh, Lady Branchley!" cried Dora, in an agony of vague apprehension, "pray, pray do not think of such a thing. Indeed, I am quite strong; it is only the heat of the weather, and nervousness, and—"

She broke down here, hiding her tears in the golden tresses of little Helen, who had run up to her and climbed into her arms.

"Are you going upstairs? Do, do!" said Helen, in the slow, deliberate way that she had inherited from her father. "I will go, too."

And Dora went out of the room, her head still bowed down over the child in her arms.

"Mamma," said Lady Augusta, who had watched the little *scena* with a curiously supercilious air, "do you know that I think we are rather spoiling Rosa's little governess between us?"

"Spoiling her!" cried Rosamond, angrily. "You couldn't spoil Dora Bracy if you were to try, Augusta; she is the sweetest, gentlest, most unselfish person I ever saw."

"I quite agree with Rosamond," said Lady Branchley. "To me, Dora is one of the most charming characters in the world."

Lady Augusta tossed her head. "Well," said she, "go on with this idol worship of yours. Spoil your *rara avis* as much as you please; but when you find the mischief is done, don't blame *me* for it!"

Many of these trials was Dora compelled, perforce, to undergo, but their iteration by no means eased the sting. The color always rose as hotly to her cheeks, the heart always beat as suffocatingly swift at every mention of the name of Sir Basil Branchley's proscribed wife as it had done the first moment in which she heard herself canvassed as people talk of a dead and buried woman. There was nothing they could say to which her penitent heart did not answer "Amen"—no accusation to which she was not ready to humble herself in the dust and cry "*Mea culpa, mea culpa!*" But there were times in which she would have given worlds to be able to retort: "But I loved him! I loved him! Had he married a princess of the realm, she could not have loved him more dearly, more truly, more eternally than *I* do!"

And so, in this strange, suppressed sort of life, the weeks and months crept away—ay, and the years—until Lady Rosamond Trente had blossomed into a beautiful dark-browed maiden of sixteen, and Helen Branchley was a gypsy of between five and six, full of mischievous freaks and captivating caprices—a child with a temper that blazed up like a volcano on the slightest provocation, and subsided into summer calm with instant contrast. The “American temper,” Lady Branchley would call it, with a smile, for she declared that the little siren had never inherited it from the Branchley side of her lineage.

“It is one of her unfortunate heritages from her mother, I dare say,” Lady Branchley remarked. “Although why I should call it an ‘American temper,’ I do not know, for you are an American by birth, Dora, and I am sure you have the sweetest and most equable temper in the world.”

“I was not always so,” said Dora, sadly. “I can remember being as stormy and ungovernable as Helen herself.”

The birth of a beautiful little boy to Julian Branchley and his wife was an event hailed with delight.

“The heir!” cried Lady Augusta, when first they laid him in her arms.

“Perhaps,” said Julian, dryly.

“There is no ‘perhaps’ about it,” cried Lady Augusta. “If Basil’s son had been in the land of the living, we should have heard from him long ago. Heirs to an estate like this do not lie *perdu*, like pearls in an oyster-shell; kiss him, Julian—your son—the heir to Branchley.”

And the bright tears sparkled into Lady Augusta’s eyes—tears of mingled pride and happiness.

Even Sir Basil’s mother accepted the fact without any apparent doubt.

“The heir to Branchley,” she repeated, softly, when she bent to press her lips to the baby’s velvet forehead. “Thank God that the old manor house will still be continued on, in the direct line of the entail.”

Julian Branchley stood silently by, with his near-sighted eyes curiously dilated, like those of a tiger, his dark brows contracted with thought.

“Mother,” said he, “are we not all a little premature? Have we any right to assume that my poor brother’s son—”

“Alas!” said Lady Branchley, “I fear that there is no possible doubt upon that subject. And I know that Basil is sufficiently large-hearted and magnanimous to welcome your

son into the vacant place in his heart, now that the grave has closed over his own."

And so they wrote to Sir Basil, camping under the palm-trees of Oriental deserts, of the birth of a second Basil Branchley; and his answering letter, written in a sort of melancholy kindness, expressed a fervent hope that he, Julian, would be happier in his son than Sir Basil had been in his.

From that time henceforward Julian Branchley looked upon himself as the probable successor to all the rank and possessions of the manor house. He took the management of affairs, financial and otherwise, into his own hands; he issued orders and changed investments with an air of absolute possessorship, which scandalized old Angevine, the steward, to the last degree. In fact, the old man sat down, and with painfully rheumatic fingers penned a stiff letter to the reigning baronet, in which he recorded his grievances.

"Sir Basil ain't neither *non compos* nor a baby," said old Angevine, "and yet Mr. Julian, he don't scruple to behave exactly as if he was. I've heerd of dead men's shoes, but I never heerd of folkses puttin' 'em on and wearin' 'em while the breath was yet in the owners' bodies. And it's a shame, so it is, and if nobody else won't interfere, *I* will, or my name ain't Stephen Angevine. And I rather think there's stuff in this letter as will bring Sir Basil Branchley home, post haste!"

But to the infinite amazement and chagrin of Mr. Angevine, Sir Basil only answered his letter with a few brief lines, wherein he clearly stated, that, during his absence, Mr. Julian Branchley was quite authorized to act according to his own judgment in all matters pertaining to the family property and affairs.

"I never seen anything like it in all my born days!" gasped old Angevine.

And Theodora, the heart-broken young mother of the missing heir, was compelled to stand calmly by and see Julian Branchley's black-eyed little son elevated triumphantly into the throne to which her own child of right possessed the scepter. He was a pretty boy, and she was naturally fond of children, but she shrunk instinctively from this tiny monarch of the Branchley nursery.

"There is only one possible way in which Basil can be cut out of the Branchley inheritance," said Lady Augusta one day.

"And that?" said her husband.

"If your brother should marry again, and have an heir of

his own," said Lady Augusta. "It is not improbable, you know. Seven years of desertion constitute a divorce, they tell me, in that savage country which Basil's wife came from. And, after all, why shouldn't he begin the world a second time at his age?"

"It is not all probable," said Julian. "My brother Basil is not a man who lightly turns and changes in his feelings. And, however unworthy this girl may have been of his affection, there is no sort of doubt but that Basil did love her with all the strength and depth of his whole nature—ay, and will love her to the end!"

And Theodora, who was sitting by the fire helping little Helen with a complicated sampler stitch which she was ambitious to learn, looked up with a strange, joyous glitter in her eyes, and a quick-drawn breath.

"Dodo," cried the little girl, "you're not attending, Dodo."

"No, dearest," said Dora, in a low voice, as she pressed the little figure close to her; "but I *will* attend now!"

"He does not know—how should he?" she pondered to herself when Helen's little demands were satisfied. "He only knows that Basil loved me once. But I think—I sometimes think—that if Basil knew all I have felt, and suffered, and undergone, he would absolve me from my sins and take me back into the paradise of his heart."

For Dora was at once wretched and happy at Branchley Manor House. Wretched in the sight of all that she had wrecked; happy in the vague sense that she was in *his* home, treading where his footsteps had once walked, making her way surely, although slowly, into the affection of *his* mother. Night after night she fell asleep with his child and hers clasped close to her heart; morning after morning she awoke with Helen's sweet breath upon her cheek. Was it possible to be wholly miserable, under all these circumstances?

CHAPTER XXXV.

VISITORS AT BRANCHLEY MANOR.

THE apple blossoms of little Basil Branchley's third birthday were showering their tiny pink shells down upon the lanes that surrounded the manor house—the May sunshine was wooing violets and daffodils into bloom in every cottage garden, and Jeannette, the white-capped Norman nurse, who was teaching the heir to chatter his nursery rhymes in the purest

French accent, had taken both the children out under a spreading Spanish chestnut-tree in the lane, where she sat knitting, while Helen ran and laughed, with long links of dandelion chains in her plump hands, and Basil toddled after, crowing and shrieking in infantine emulation, his wide blue sash glancing in the grass like a living flower, his dark, tropical beauty contrasting with Helen's golden curls and complexion of mingled snow and carnation. Further in the labyrinths of budding trees Dora walked, her fair face overshadowed by a broad-brimmed garden-hat, her eyes intent on the pages of a book. But, despite her absorption in the volume, every peal of Helen's sweet laughter left its impress on her ears, every glimmer of the child's burnished hair printed its yellow shine upon her vision.

"Madame need not incommode herself to come out into the air," said Jeannette, in voluble French. "I myself will assume the care of *la petite* mademoiselle while Monsieur Basil plays with her, and will myself agree to bring her back to madame, all perfectly safe."

"Thank you, Jeannette," Dora answered, with the sweet sad smile that endeared her to all the dependents of the manor house, "but I never leave Mademoiselle Helene for a single instant."

"*Ah, ciel! quelle devotion!*" murmured the *bonne*, with a sentimental uplifting of her brows, "madame should herself have been a mother!"

And she knitted away, singing a monotonous provincial refrain under her breath, and glancing up ever and anon in watchful care lest the newly curled hair, the embroidered skirts, and glistening gold sleeve clasps of her little charge should in any way be injured by his heedless, romping sport.

While this little scene was transpiring at the back of the house, Julian Branchley sat writing in his library on the northern side, and a middle-aged woman, comely dressed, and browned with the sun and wind, was trudging across a by-path, or species of short cut, which led from the Branchley road almost directly to the library door; a path which was seldom used by any one but Mr. Branchley himself, and wound around hedges of laurel and rhododendron. She walked slowly and as if she were very tired, and close at her side trotted a fair-haired little lad with blue eyes and a pretty, slender figure, disguised by ill-fitting clothes.

"Is this the place, Aunt Joanna?" said he, looking up with intent regard at the stately mansion of cream-colored stone,

with its time-darkened gables, and oriels of rich, stained glass.

"You're not to call me Aunt Joanna," said the woman, sharply. "I am Mrs. Beckwith, as I've told you half a hundred times before. Yes, this is the place, and a fine sightly spot it is," stretching her long neck to get a better view of the ivy-garlanded walls. "Come!"

And the first warning that Julian Branchley had of the presence of unexpected visitors was a stealthy step on the deep crimson pile of the Persian carpet, a shadow falling darkly across his desk.

He looked up sharply and suddenly at the woman and child, and laid down his pen, with a gesture of irritation.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "And what do you want? Do you know that this is a private room?"

He had risen to his feet as he spoke, and the ominous lighting of his dark eyes would have awed any one less determined than Miss Joanna Beck.

She dropped a stiff, ungainly courtesy; for years had in no wise improved or added to the personal charms of Miss Joanna. "Am I speaking to Sir Basil Branchley?" said she, her furtive eyes taking in all the luxurious surroundings as she uttered the words.

"Sir Basil Branchley is, at present, in Palestine," stiffly answered Julian. "But I am his representative."

"Oh," said Joanna. "You are Mr. Julian?"

"I am Mr. Julian Branchley. Have the goodness to state your business, and be quick about it. My time is much occupied."

"Wally," said Miss Joanna, glancing at an illustrated county map on the table, "just you take that picture-book and go the window for awhile. There's a nice seat there, just right for you, and I'll go bail there is lots of things as'll interest you!"

The boy, who had been looking solemnly up into the strange gentleman's dark face, obeyed involuntarily. As Julian Branchley's eye fell on him, he advanced a step or two as if to speak, then stopped.

"What child is that?" he cried out, huskily.

Joanna Beck came so close to him that only the baize-covered table intervened between them, and leaning over it she said, in a low tone:

"He is Sir Basil Branchley's son."

Julian laughed hoarsely.

"Woman," said he, "what do you take me for?"

"I don't take you for anything, Mr. Julian Branchley," said she. "I merely state the facts. He is Sir Basil's son—and I, who bring him here, am his mother's sister."

"How can you prove this?" demanded Julian, moistening his dry lips with his tongue.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Branchley," said Joanna, letting herself sink into a leather-cushioned chair, carved in rich Gothic points and studded with silver nails, and glancing around where the little boy, curled up in the window-seat with his coarsely shod feet under him, was intent on the pictures of the "County Map." "It's four years ago, and more, since my sister—Sir Basil's wife—brought these two children to my house, and left 'em in my care, while she went—or at least so she said—to look for her husband. I suspicioned then that she meant to leave them on my hands, and after-circumstances showed that I was right. She never came back for 'em, nor she never wrote. Well, Mr. Julian Branchley, I am a working-woman, and it was all I could do to maintain myself, let alone two great growing children. And while I was turning it over in my mind what to do, a fine lady came along and wanted to adopt Walter, the boy. I let him go, of course; he was a deal of trouble, and I never was fond of children. And then I had a chance to go to some friends in Vermont, and I just put Helen, the girl, into an institution and got 'em both off my hands. Well, I stayed a spell with my cousins up North—but somehow we didn't hit it off together—and a few months ago I came back to Saratoga. Then the neighbors told me as Sir Basil himself had been back after his children, and had taken Helen with him, and was mortal put out because he could get no tidings of Walter. I heard of Walter up in Vermont, Mrs. Cheswick, as adopted him, lived in Burlington, not a great way from my relatives; but I had taken particular good care not to let on as I was anywhere in the neighborhood, for I didn't know but they might change their minds at any minute, and I had no notion of going into the orphan asylum business again for nobody. I knew the child was taken good care of, and that was all as concerned me one way or the other. But Mrs. Cheswick died—and Mr. Cheswick, he didn't want to be bothered with the care of a baby like that—and they was just a-calculating where to put him, when I came to Burlington for him, for I thought, you see, as Sir Basil would be glad to get his child back again—and if any one was to get a reward, why not me? And I turned, and twisted, and scraped, and saved, to get together enough money to cross the ocean, and here I am now!

And there is Sir Basil Branchley's son, and the son of my half-sister, Theodora!"

She leaned back in her chair with folded arms and an aspect of grim content.

"All this is very well," said Julian, who had listened to the briefly told tale with ill-disguised uneasiness; "but I do not suppose that you expect me to believe it."

Miss Joanna rose to her feet. "Why shouldn't you believe it?" demanded she, brusquely; "it's gospel truth, every word of it. Here's the boy, and I'm willing to swear to his identity."

"Branchley Manor House is a fine inheritance," observed Mr. Branchley, coldly: "there's nothing to prevent half a dozen children starting up as claimants for it."

"Humph!" grunted Miss Joanna, "you think I'm an impostor."

"I think," said Julian Branchley, "that you have miscalculated the sort of person you have to deal with in me."

But, even while Julian Branchley spoke, his lower lip was only kept from quivering by the steady grasp of his teeth, and his eye roamed furtively from the unconscious child in the window-seat to the grim female who sat facing him like a grenadier.

Miss Joanna rose up and began retying the strings of the bonnet she had unfastened.

"Well," said she, "I don't just know where Palestine is, but I guess I can make out by inquiring. And I shouldn't wonder if Sir Basil Branchley himself made me more welcome than you do. Come, Walter!"

"Stay a moment," said Julian, with a deep-red glow coming into his dark face. "Mind, I do not credit a word you have been saying."

"You might as well tell me I'm a liar at once, and be done with it," said Joanna, indignantly.

"My brother's boy is dead," added Julian. "He has been dead for four years—and all these transparent attempts to extort money are quite useless. But—" he paused, looking Joanna hard in the face.

"Well?"

"You have had a long journey, and the child seems a fine little fellow enough. You can leave him here, if you please. I know some respectable parties, not far from here, who will be glad to give him a home, and bring him up to a respectable trade. In short, I will undertake to see that he is provided for. As for you—"

"Well—as for me?" said Miss Joanna, listening shrewdly, with one eye half closed, and her lips screwed tightly together.

"I am willing to pay your passage back to America, and give you a little present of money, for all the useless trouble you have taken."

"What may be your idea of a little present of money?" asked the woman, slowly.

"Fifty pounds!" said Julian Branchley, at hazard.

Joanna Beck calculated within herself.

"Fifty pounds!" she muttered under her breath. "That is two hundred and fifty dollars of our money. It ain't as much as I expected—but may be it's better than traveling on to Palestine, and perhaps missing Sir Basil after all. Well," turning to Julian, "it's a bargain."

"Stop!" said Mr. Branchley. "You have not heard all the conditions."

"Conditions?"

"Yes. In the first place, this is an entirely confidential transaction between you and me. You are to return to your country as quietly as you came. I do not want the feelings of my relatives harrowed by any sensational stories."

"Who wants to harrow 'em?" said Miss Joanna, curtly. "I don't!"

"In the second place, the child is to be given over entirely, and without reserve, to my keeping."

"Of course," said Joanna.

"In the third place, you are to pledge yourself never to communicate with Sir Basil Branchley upon this subject."

"Agreed," nodded Joanna.

"Here is the money," said Julian Branchley, unlocking a drawer in the lower part of his desk and producing a *rouleau* of gold pieces. "As for your passage money, I will at once telegraph to my London agents to secure you accommodations in the next steamer that sails from Southampton, under the name of—"

"Of Joanna Beck."

"Very well," nodded Mr. Branchley. "Did any of the servants see you come?"

"No!" with a grim smile.

"All the better. If you follow this little path through the shrubberies, you will be able to retrace your way to the road without being seen."

"It's the way I came," said Joanna. "Well, Mr. Julian Branchley, I wish ye a very good-morning. I think you might have made a more liberal bargain with me; but there's a

proverb in my country, which says that half a loaf is better than no bread."

"I hardly consider this in the light of a *bargain*," said Mr. Branchley, coldly.

"Don't you?" said Miss Joanna. "Well, I do. Good-bye, Walter."

The child looked around with a start, and seeing his aunt about to depart, caught up his frayed little straw hat, and ran to her side, with one regretful backward look to the "Country Map," whose splendors he had but half explored.

"You're not to go, Walter," said Miss Joanna; "you're to stay here with this gentleman."

"Am I?" The boy glanced timidly up at the swarthy-faced stranger with his eyeglasses, and the two deep wrinkles between his brows—and Julian well-nigh recoiled at the blue clear light of Basil's very eyes shining up into his own.

"This gentleman's fond of little boys," said Joanna, ironically. "He'll be very kind to you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," Walter answered, in a puzzled sort of way, without offering or seeming to expect anything in the nature of a parting caress. Poor little lad! he had been so tossed and buffeted about the world that he had come to regard himself as belonging to no one in particular, and knew nothing of the fond caresses, the protecting cares which are the natural heritage of other children.

Mr. Branchley looked moodily down upon him as Joanna disappeared among the shrubberies.

"Little boy," said he, "what is your name?"

"Walter Branchley Cheswick," the little fellow answered, promptly.

"How old are you?"

"I am six, going on seven."

"Where are your parents?" went on Julian Branchley, attentively studying the round, sunburned face, above which the flaxen curls clustered in rich abundance.

"Papa is in England," said Walter. "And mamma ran away from me when I was but a little child. If you please, sir, I am very hungry, and I would like a piece of bread and butter."

"Ah!" said Mr. Branchley. "That is natural enough, too."

He touched a spring in one of the fine old carved ebony cabinets that occupied the angles of the apartment, and reached a compartment in which were tropical fruits, oranges, bananas, and hot-house grapes, piled up on a silver salver, and

a silver stand of wines in glistening cut-glass bottles. Part of a cold roast fowl, and some light French rolls were arranged on a plate beyond, with a silver knife and fork, and a *tête-à-tête* service of pale-blue Sèvres china, for it was Julian Branchley's fancy always to have refreshments within his reach, in case he did not care to leave his library for the dining apartment, for the regular hours of meals, or, as was often the custom, his studies, were prolonged late into the night. He took out one of the pale-blue plates with tiny landscapes painted on its center, carved a liberal piece of chicken, broke a roll, and laid a bunch of blooming grapes round it, while little Walter stared as if the tall, dark man, with the stoop in his shoulders, had been one of the magicians in the "Arabian Nights," of whose wonderful deeds kind Mrs. Cheswick had told him.

"Eat!" said Mr. Branchley, briefly—and Walter did eat as if he was famished, while Julian paced slowly up and down the room with folded arms, watching the fair-haired little lad from under his bent brows, and thinking.

Of course it was an imposture—all an atrocious piece of blackmail, this story of Sir Basil's son being yet alive. Of course there was no slightest foundation of truth in the whole thing. But still it behooved him, Julian Branchley, as the representative of his absent brother, to crush the whole monstrous fable in its inception. Where would be the end of such lies as this, if they were allowed to flourish unchecked? The boy seemed a frank-faced, smiling little fellow enough, with no lack of confidence; but the idea of his being Sir Basil's lost child! Absurd—perfectly absurd! The idea of this nameless transatlantic waif, probably picked out of some "Orphanage" or "Refuge," obtruding himself between little Basil and the Branchley estates!

Julian broke into a low, hoarse laugh at the idea.

And all the time he knew, as well as if an angel's prophetic voice had announced it to him, that the little child before him, with his dusty shoes and sun-embrowned face, and blue, clear eyes, was the son and heir of his absent brother!

Little Walter looked up, as the moody man passed by him with muttering lips and abstracted eyes.

"Some one is knocking," said he. "Shall I open the door?"

"Stay where you are," said Julian, almost savagely, and advancing to the door, he said, without opening it:

"Who is there? What do you want?"

It was Lady Augusta's maid.

"If you please, sir," said she, "my lady wants to know if you will be ready to drive out with her at one o'clock?"

"Tell your mistress I am particularly engaged to-day," said he. "I shall not go out at all."

He locked the door as he spoke, and the woman went away, thinking to herself that master got queerer every day.

Julian was turning away, when he felt the skirts of his coat pulled gently.

"If you please, sir," said Walter, "I should like a drink."

Julian glared down into the blue, frank eyes that were the living copy of Sir Basil's.

"A drink?" said he, slowly. "Yes, you shall have a drink."

He went once more to the secret cupboard, and took out one of the glittering many-fauceted bottles which occupied the silver liqueur stand. It was some time before he could find a goblet to suit himself, as he stood there trembling, with his back to the child. But presently he turned around with a glass half full of pale-red wine.

"Do you like wine, boy?" said he, trying to smile affably.

"I don't know what it's like," said Walter, dubiously.

"It is sweet and good," said Julian; "you will like it. I shall pour a little water into this, however; it is rather too strong for a child. Now drink it."

He held the goblet to Walter's lips—the boy drank eagerly.

"It is good," said he. "I should like some more."

"Not just now," said Julian. "Are you not tired? Would you not like to lie down and sleep?"

"If you please," said docile Walter, who, although he did not feel in the least degree sleepy, was anxious to conciliate his new guardian.

Mr. Branchley opened the door of a little closet, adjacent to the library, which had been fitted up for his own use as a sort of dressing-room. Opposite the entrance was a low walnut sofa, with a tasseled pillow flung upon its arm.

"Lie down there," said Julian Branchley. "You are tired—sleep will do you good."

Walter lay down obediently, and closed his eyes, in the resolute effort to do the dark gentleman's will. Quiet and obedient as he seemed, there was a world of vague conjectures and perplexities at work within his infant brain. He had been trained by his aunt Joanna in the good old fashionable doctrine that "children must be seen and not heard;" he had been tutored that it was an arch offense for little boys to ask questions; so

he lay there pondering to himself, and wondering what all this meant.

"He can't be my papa," thought Walter, wistfully, as the door closed softly upon him, with an almost inaudible grating of the key in its lock. "My papa would have kissed me, and been glad. I don't think *he* is glad. But perhaps he is going to take me to my papa!"

And then Walter fell to staring at the pretty pictures which hung around the walls, and wondering what was the use of the great silver dressing-case and all its sparkling bottles; and just as he was marveling whether or not his aunt Joanna was coming back, and secretly hoping she would not, he fell fast asleep.

And all this time Julian Branchley was pacing, pacing up and down the room, with folded arms, and stern, set face.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A CHILD'S HAT.

"My dear Julian, how pale you are!" was Lady Augusta Branchley's exclamation to her husband, as he made his appearance at the dinner-table that evening.

"Pale! Am I?" Julian called up a galvanic smile to his lips, which was about as similar to the genuine article as is the yellow blaze of a pyrotechnic display to the soft glare of sunshine. "I believe I have been studying [pretty closely, but otherwise I am quite well."

"That is fortunate," remarked Lady Augusta, serenely; "because you know we are engaged to Mrs. Conyngham's charade party for this evening."

Julian looked perplexed. "Mrs. Conyngham's charade party!" said he. "Upon my word, I had forgotten all about it. And in any event, I shall be unable to keep my engagement."

"You don't mean," cried Lady Augusta, "that you are not going?"

"I do mean that I am not going."

"But, Julian, what will Mrs. Conyngham think? What will people say?"

"What they please," said Mr. Branchley, calmly. "I have letters to write, and business papers of the utmost importance to look over that will keep me engaged until a late hour, and any such foolery as charade parties is quite beside the question."

Lady Augusta pouted.

"One might as well be a widow, or an old maid, as to live as I do," said she. "And I don't see why you devote yourself so closely to these business matters. The other gentlemen in the country leave such drudgery to their stewards and lawyers."

"He is well served who serves himself!" said Julian, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"At all events," said Lady Augusta, "I shall not go to Mrs. Conyngham's alone."

"My dear," retorted her husband, "I particularly desire that you will. Because I am perforce compelled to be a recluse, it does not follow that your youth and beauty should be hidden away."

Lady Augusta could not help smiling; the well-timed compliment was not without its effect.

"And," added Julian, "I really will try to accompany you to Lady Besard's reception on Friday."

"By the way," said Lady Branchley, when the dessert was brought on, "who were the people that came to the study this morning? Angevine was quite horrified at the idea of tramps being able to make their way into our private grounds without let or hinderance! He watched, to arrest their progress when they should come out again, but either they vanished into thin air, or escaped by some path of which Angevine knows nothing."

"People!" Julian looked blankly up from his pine-apple ice, with a face which, if possible, was paler than that which had just provoked the comments of his wife.

"An old woman," said Lady Branchley, "and a little boy."

"Helen," whispered unconscious Dora, whose eyes were watchfully fixed upon the little golden-haired girl in her white dress and coral ornaments, "you are eating too much of that ice!"

"Please, Dodo," coaxed the child, "can I have some of those white grapes?"

"Grapes, if you please," said Dora, "but no more ices."

"Really," said Lady Augusta, turning sharply around, "I would like to know what charm Dora possesses over that child, to insure her obedience on all possible occasions. I only know that I can not make her mind me. I sometimes think, mamma," turning to Lady Branchley, "that we are not severe enough with her."

Dora's eyes flashed—involuntarily she moved toward the

child, and bit her lip to control the indignant words that rose hotly to her tongue.

"Yes, you may color up," said Lady Augusta, turning to look the young governess full in the face, "but, after all, *you* are not the child's mother!"

Dora shrunk back without a word, and Lady Branchley made haste to say:

"My dear Augusta, we must remember that poor little Nell is motherless, indeed, and try to be lenient with her baby failings. I am sure she is a most lovely and winning child, and she is certain, sooner or later, to outgrow these little inequalities of temper. Dora is right—there is no cure for them like love and patience."

"Augusta has never been so fond of Helen since her own boy was born," said Lady Rosamond, lifting her large, unshrinking eyes to her sister's face.

"It is false!" cried Lady Augusta.

"It is *true*," said Lady Rosamond.

"I shall begin to think," said Lady Augusta, angrily, pushing back her chair, "that the only way to break up these constant bickerings and dissensions is to send Helen away to school."

"A child like that!" cried Lady Rosamond.

"Yes, a child like that," said Lady Augusta, spitefully. "If she is old enough to make mischief, she is old enough to learn."

Julian, wrapped in his own reflections, seemed to hear nothing of what was going on around him; he merely looked up in surprise as Lady Augusta swept past him out of the room. But Dora rose and came, pale and trembling, to the vacant seat beside Lady Branchley.

"Dear Lady Branchley," faltered she, "surely you would never send Helen from you?"

"Never," said Lady Branchley, quietly. "Do not be afraid, my love. As long as I live, little Nelly is safe from Augusta's uncertain temper. Poor girl—it is as Rosamond says—since the birth of her own boy she has become strangely jealous of Helen. And I sometimes wonder what has become of the sweet, angelic Augusta, who used to be here as a girl. She is so altered, so domineering and arrogant. If I had my own way, Dora—"

"Well, Lady Branchley?" The girl was leaning over Lady Branchley's chair, her lips apart, her soft eyes beaming with unspeakable gratitude.

"I should like a daughter-in-law exactly like you, dear!"

Dora dropped Lady Branchley's hand and went, silently, and with drooping head, back to her chair beside little Helen.

"If only I dared to speak!" she thought. "If only I dared to tell her all!"

But the thought seemed to pass almost immediately out of the old lady's mind; she turned to her son:

"But you did not tell me who those people were, Julian, that disturbed old Angevine's equanimity so terribly."

"Oh, those people? I had forgotten all about them," answered Julian Branchley, carelessly. "Beggars, of course! I must see and have that little shrubbery path closed up. It is very convenient for me, but we can't have the place overrun with tramps. And now, mother, if you will excuse me," rising from the table, "I will go back to my study."

"Julian," said Lady Branchley, anxiously, "are you not working too hard?"

"Not in the least, mother," said he, smiling. "Believe me, hard work agrees with me."

Five or ten minutes later little Helen came bounding across the lawn to where Dora was sitting in the cool freshness of the sunset.

"See, Dodo, see what I have found under the library window," said she, holding up something. "A child's straw hat, with a blue ribbon around it. Those beggar people must have dropped it, that came to Uncle Julian! It's a boy's hat, Dodo, not a girl's hat. What shall I do with it? Shall I give it to Ponto, to worry it into little bits?"

Instinctively Dora reached out her hand to rescue the poor little battered hat, with its rag of faded blue ribbon, its notched edges, and the one or two threads of light-brown hair clinging to the loose straws in the lining, and a strange loving longing came into her heart.

"No, Nelly, no," said she. "Some little child has worn it. Do not let us throw it away; we will carry it down to the lodge-keeper's little boy; it will do very well for him to weed onions with."

Oh, strange providences of God! stranger mysteries of the human heart. Was there no whispering voice to tell Theodora Branchley that her lost treasure was quietly sleeping within a stone's-throw of her sore, aching heart? Was there no blood-red hand to beckon of coming danger? no intuition to bid her mother-heart beware?

But the mother walked unconsciously up and down the winding path beside the River Usk, leading Helen by the hand; and the child slept on in his deep, drugged oblivion,

all unaware of the shadow of his coming doom. And Julian Branchley, like one of the grim, masked conspirators of the tragic stage, sat alone in his room, waiting for the velvet pall of the friendly dark to cover all.

At nine o'clock Julian Branchley looked out of the casement. It was a still and cloudy night, with neither moon nor stars to illumine the intense darkness. The crash of the carriage wheels had just rolled away over the graveled drive; he knew that Lady Augusta and Lady Rosamond had gone to the charade party. He opened the door; the dog growled in low, deep accents, as if scenting danger in the air.

"Come here, Prince; come here, good dog," said Julian Branchley; and leading the shaggy monster into the study, he chained him to one of the carved oaken legs of the table. "It would not do to risk any premature disturbances," he thought. He opened the desk-drawer, took out some notes and gold, and reached a long sealskin coat from a peg in the closet, as well as a traveling-cap, which almost concealed his face from view. The dog started up with a second low growl, as Julian stepped forward out of the shadows of the room into the circle of lamp-light.

"Quiet, old fellow, quiet!" said Julian, with a grim smile. "Come, the disguise can't be so bad, if it imposes even upon you!"

The dog lay down again, his ears drooping and his tail curled close to him, as if ashamed of the momentary indiscretion into which he had been betrayed, and Julian Branchley, softly unlocking the door of the dressing-closet, went in.

"Confound it!" muttered he between his set teeth, "where is the boy's hat? I can find it nowhere. Never mind; I can easily wrap the shawl over his head."

Five minutes later a black and silent figure crept, like the slow-gliding shadows of the night itself, through the sinuous shrubbery paths, and along the dew-sprinkled highway, pausing ever and anon to rest with its burden, and to wipe the sweat from its brow. Julian Branchley never had been a muscular man, and the dead weight of a child of six years old is something considerable. At the nearest way-side inn he engaged a fly—studiously averting his face and speaking in a disguised voice—a fly to take him to the most contiguous railway station.

"Who was it, Jake?" said the innkeeper's wife, when her liege lord and master returned from his fare.

"A shady chap, all wrapped with furs, and a little lad as

was fast asleep," returned the man. "Do you know, Polly—" pausing with a draught of beer at his very lips.

"Well?"

"It looks to me uncommon like a case of kidnapping!" said the man.

"You don't say so!"

"Un-com-mon," said Jake, nodding his head, and draining the pewter measure to its last drop. "But he paid me my fare without beating me down a ha'-penny—and anyhow, it ain't no business o' mine."

Julian Branchley was just lifting little Walter from the third-class carriage of the train in which he had traveled for four long hours, when the child woke up.

The intense darkness, illuminated only by the glittering station lights, the swinging lanterns of the porters and the red signals that glowed like fiery eyes at the junctions, struck on his senses like a frightful dream; the heavy opiate which he had taken still hung over him like a vague cloud—and, brave little man though he ordinarily was, he uttered a cry of terrified bewilderment.

"Hush!" Julian Branchley's hand was placed angrily over his mouth. "Here—driver, where are you? Do you mean to be all night?"

And Walter felt himself lifted into a close, moldy-smelling hack by the strong arm of the dark man with the spectacles and the two lines between his brows. He clung in an ecstasy of childish terror to Julian's shoulder.

"Where am I?" said he.

"You are here, with me. Don't make such a fuss," said Julian Branchley, harshly.

"But where are we going?"

"You are going to school," said Julian. "All children go to school."

"I—I would rather stay at home with Joanna," faltered Walter.

"That is nonsense," said Julian, sharply. "All boys must be educated. You'll like it when you get there."

"Please, have I been asleep?" asked Walter, after a momentary silence.

"Yes."

"Did—did I have my supper first?" questioned Walter, induced thereto by sundry sensations of an aching void in the region of the stomach.

"You shall have your supper when we get there," said Julian, reflecting with some pangs of human compassion that

it was nearly twelve hours since the poor little boy had had anything to eat.

"Is it far?" said Walter, wistfully.

"No, not very far."

Little Walter leaned his curly head against the mildewed lining of the ancient conveyance, and kept back his tears; not without difficulty, for Walter was tired and dizzy-brained, and he felt faint and frightened; and though he had an exalted idea that it was not manly to cry, he was but a little fellow still, and human nature is human nature. He was very nearly asleep again, however, when the sudden stopping of the hack in some lonely place startled him once more into consciousness.

"Jump out, my lad," said Julian, speaking briskly.

"This is the place!"

The driver had rung a bell in a high red-brick wall, and Walter stood leaning against Mr. Branchley, and staring up at the ink-black sky, until a little old woman came to the gate, carrying in one hand a lantern, which she shaded from the night wind with the other. To her Julian spoke a word or two in a low voice; she nodded, with alacrity.

"Night nor day, it don't make much difference for us," said she. "Please to walk in, sir; I'll speak to the professor!"

And then there was another interval of chill, raw air, and darkness, and Walter found himself in a meanly furnished little room, where there was a ragged carpet and uncurtained windows, and a fat, bald-headed old man in a greasy palm-leaf dressing-gown, scraping and bowing like a Chinese mandarin. And the old woman brought a bowl of bread and milk, and Walter fell asleep once more in the very act of eating it.

"What shall we do with him for to-night, professor?" demanded the old woman.

"Get him a pillow and a couple of blankets," promptly responded the professor, who was evidently in the habit of dealing promptly with emergencies. "You can put him in the dormitories to-morrow?"

And the early sunrise was weaving its golden meshes in the blossoming trees along the River Usk, when Julian Branchley crept, pale, jaded, and with livid features, back into his own study, and strove, by the aid of cold water and towels, and a glass of raw brandy, to remove the more evident traces of his night's journey. It was fortunate for him that Lady Augusta did not come down-stairs, after the dissipation of the charade party, until noon.

"Do you actually mean, Julian," said she, "that you sat up all night reading and writing in that horrid den of yours?"

"I believe I did," said Mr. Branchley, with a smile.

"One would easily know it from your face," said the lady, with a little shudder. "Your eyes are dim, and your skin is yellow, like that of a consumptive. I declare, Julian," looking a little closer, "you have actually grown ten years older since this time last night. I beg that for the future you will leave off these studious habits."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Branchley, sharply. Somehow Lady Augusta's scrutiny irritated him.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"THE HAPBURY HOME."

"WHERE am I?" said little Walter Brande, as his name had been inscribed on the records of the "Hapbury Home."

"You are at home," said Professor Proale, with a greasy smile.

Walter looked solemnly up into the professor's small, black eyes. Poor little fellow! he had never known what the divine meaning of the word "home" really was, but he had a vague idea of what it ought to be, and the Hapbury article did not come anywhere near his standard.

"No," said he, "I am not."

"It ain't polite to contradict, young sir," said the professor. "Here you are, and here your excellent guardian chooses that you shall remain, until you are old enough to be taught some good and useful trade."

"What is a trade?" said Walter.

"It ain't polite to ask questions, either," added the professor. "You will be told all that is necessary for you to know in due time. As for the rest, we won't mind. Dorcas," to a slovenly looking maid-servant who had shuffled in, carrying a pair of newly trimmed oil-lamps, "take Walter Brande to the dormitories. Show him where to wash, and give him half of one of the towels!"

Dorcas nodded good-humoredly toward the forlorn little boy, and he followed her across a wide and not particularly well-kept passage, up a wooden stairway, into a large dreary room, uncarpeted, and lighted by double rows of small windows. Beneath every window stood a coarse wooden bedstead, covered with patchwork quilts, and displaying linen that was neither fine nor clean; and each bedstead had its wash-table, its roller towel, and its one stained pine chair.

"Let me see," said Dorcas, looking around, "you are to sleep with Israel Newitt. He kicks, Israel does, and has bad dreams. The new boys always sleeps with Israel. Number Nine is your bed."

"Are there nine boys here?" asked Walter, in some apprehension.

"Bless your heart," said Dorcas, "there's nineteen, now you've come. Two in a bed, and Master Jenkinson, as is parlor boarder down-stairs."

"What is a parlor boarder?" demanded Walter, in amazement.

"His people pays extra," said Dorcas. "He's silly, and the other boys puts on him. But he's good-natured. Now, little Brande, where's your trunk?"

"I haven't got any," said Walter.

"Your bag, then? Come, I'm in a hurry."

"I didn't bring a bag."

"Mercy on us," said Dorcas, "what was your friends thinking about?"

"I haven't got any friends," remarked Walter, with gravity.

"Then the Lord have pity on you!" said Dorcas, tartly. "Here's your bed, anyhow—Number Nine, remember—and you're to have half the towel and table. And if Israel Newitt tries any of his mischievous tricks on you just let me know."

Dorcas went away with a pile of soiled towels over her arm, and Walter sat down on the foot of his bed, an infant Robinson Crusoe in the desert island of the world. Child though he was, he felt the atmosphere of dirt and disorder and intense forlornity that surrounded him—he comprehended in some degree the desolation of his future.

"I won't stay here," said Walter to himself. "I'll run away."

A soft step stealing into the room here disturbed his unquiet meditations. He started to behold a tall, ungainly lad of eleven or so, who thrust a paper parcel into his pocket as he shuffled in.

"Halloo, Sneak!" said the boy, "what are you hiding away here for?"

"I'm not hiding," said Walter.

"Do you tell me I lie?" The lad dealt Walter a smart blow on the side of his face as he spoke; the child scrambled to his feet in an agony of rage and pain, but was too manly to cry.

"What is that for?" said he.

"To teach you your place," said the big lad. "Get off my bed!"

"It's mine, too," said Walter.

The boy looked malevolently at him—he was pock-marked, with large whitish-blue eyes and a wide mouth like a shark.

"Look here, you," said he, "you've got a thing or two to learn yet. Do you know who I am?"

"No," said Walter.

"I'm Newitt."

"Oh!" said Walter, solemnly. "You are the boy that kicks?"

"You'll see whether I kick or not," said Newitt, grinning viciously, "if you don't mind your eye."

Walter did not understand what this meant, but he looked hard at Master Israel Newitt, who had seated himself in the one chair, with his hands in his pockets.

"Pull off my shoes," said Israel.

"What for?" said Walter.

"Because I tell you to."

Walter hesitated a moment or two, but there was that in the expression of the big boy's eye that made him conclude that obedience would be wise. He knelt down and began the obnoxious task—but presently he drew back, his short upper lip unconsciously curling.

"They're dirty," said he.

The next instant he found himself on his back, toppled over by a dexterous kick from Israel Newitt, planted directly in his chest.

"Dirty, are they?" said Newitt. "Pull 'em off, I say—and then take 'em down in the back-yard and black 'em."

"I am not your servant," cried Walter, very red in the face, and with difficulty stifling his sobs. "I will not obey you!"

Half a dozen other boys had sauntered into the room, some with books, some with tops and marbles, and one, much envied by his companions, with a wire cage containing two or three white mice. They were standing around, contemplating the scene with the idle curiosity of lookers-on in general, but nobody offered to interfere in the little stranger's behalf.

"Must I black his boots?" appealed Walter, turning passionately to the group.

"Don't be an ass!" said one, indifferently.

"Of course you're Newitt's fag," said the boy with the white mice.

While Newitt himself uttered a snort of triumphant disdain.

"Boys," said he, "take off your shoes. The new boy shall black 'em all around. It'll take the stiffness out of his joints. And if you don't look lively about it, White-face, I'll flog you within an inch of your life. There!"

Walter looked an instant at him, with quivering lip and cheeks blanched to a degree to merit the young ruffian's nickname. And then, dashing away, he flew down-stairs to where Professor Proale was serenely drinking his morning coffee, in the society of Mrs. Proale and two little girls, in long, braided pig-tails and flounced cambric frocks, while Dorcas waited on them. The boys breakfasted later, on fried mush, oatmeal, and weak tea.

"Eh!" said the professor, turning around, with an unctuous morsel of fried ham on the end of his fork. "How! What's all this about?"

"He says I'm to black his boots, sir," said Walter, with quickly coming breath. "And he struck me, and knocked me down."

"This is very sad," said the professor. "Quarrels and dissensions already? I hope, Walter Brande, that you are not going to prove a fire-brand in our happy home!"

"Am I to black his boots?" demanded the child, passionately.

"Pride and obstinacy, pride and obstinacy," groaned the professor. "Go upstairs, my little lad. Strive to teach yourself the lesson of meekness and submission. And remember that it is against the rules to intrude on my privacy in this barbaric style. I shall feel it my duty to punish you severely the next time it occurs."

Thus rebuffed Walter turned around and went slowly upstairs. Master Israel Newitt was lying on the bed kicking up his heels.

"Tattle-tale," sneered he, "much good you got by it, didn't you? Sneak thief! Coward! Spy!"

"Stop calling me names," said Walter, doggedly.

"I'll stop when I'm ready, and not before," said Israel.

"Do you see all them boots?"

Walter was silent.

"Do you see 'em, I say?"

"Yes."

"Take 'em down-stairs and blacken 'em. Shine 'em up good, now. And when you've brought 'em all back and put 'em on the fellows' feet—"

"I will not do that!" cried the child, with swelling heart and eyes full of angry tears.

"We'll see whether you will or not," said Israel Newitt, with a grin. "When you've done that, I say, I'll take the nonsense out of you with a leather strap with an iron buckle on the end of it. There ain't no new boy bullies me without I knows the reason why."

There was a dangerous lurid light in his eye that made poor little Walter Brande's heart stand still with instinctive terror. He ventured to steal an appealing glance at the other lads, but he received no answering look of pity or sympathy. Some of them were stolidly indifferent; some appeared to regard the whole thing in the light of a most amusing entertainment. Evidently the new boy was looked upon as the natural prey of Israel Newitt in particular, and the rest in general.

With a sinking heart Walter gathered up the shoes, and crept down-stairs.

"Dorcas," said he to the maid who was crossing the yard with a pail of water, "where shall I go to clean these?"

"Oh!" said Dorcas. "They've put you at that already, have they? They always does it with the new boys. It's my belief as boys is worse than wild animals. Well, you'd better go out to the wood-shed!"

The wood-shed was a long, low building skirting the road, where tools, kindling wood, harness, and packing-boxes were promiscuously piled together, and a stubby brush, with one or two half-empty bottles of blacking, were crammed under a bench. He looked first at the shoes, then at the blacking, utterly ignorant how to begin.

Just then the voice of some one whistling in the bushes that had grown up in the road, against the back of the shed, struck upon his ear. He climbed up to peep through the openings in the warped boards, and saw a gypsy-faced old man sitting on the grass, with a solder-pot and portable furnace on one side of him, and a handkerchief full of cold meat and bread on the other.

"What are you doing?" demanded Walter, in a whisper.

The old man looked up at the sound of a human voice.

"I'm a-eating of my breakfast, young gentleman," he said, with a smile that lighted up his brown countenance not unpleasantly.

"I should like some, too," said Walter.

"Come out here and get it, then," said the man.

"I don't know how," said the child, wistfully.

The old man laid down his half-munched slice of bread,

and, turning deliberately, twisted a loose board from its nails at the bottom of the partition.

"Cats and dogs can creep through them," said he, "and so can little boys. Lively now!"

And in another minute Walter had struggled through, and emerged on the other side, all grass stains and damp mold.

"Who are you?" asked Walter, looking earnestly up into the man's face as he eagerly devoured the cold meat and dry, sour bread.

"I'm a tinker," said the old man. "But folks calls me a tramp."

"What is a tramp?" said Walter.

"A man as jogs round the world as best he can, young master," said the man. "A man as begs when he can't work; and works when he can't beg."

"Did you beg *this*?" said Walter, looking down at the broken victuals.

"I did, young master."

"Where did you come from?"

"From Whichley, young master."

"And where are you going now?"

"D'ye see them woods?" pointing with a brown finger across a slope of meadows. "Through them woods, as the crow flies, to Birtwell."

Walter crept close to his side. "Can I go with you?" said he.

"Nay, nay, young master," protested the tramp, "what would your friends say?"

"I have no friends," said Walter. "They brought me—a strange man brought me to the Hapbury Home las' night. The boys are going to beat me with a strap. Please, please let me go, will you?"

The old man looked dubiously at the child's pallid, eager face. Human nature is human nature—and the itinerant tinker had not yet forgotten or forgiven the opprobrious epithets with which Professor Proale had banished him from his door half an hour or so ago.

"A lazy sneak—a prowling thief, eh!" thought the old tinker. "The stocks too good for me—the dogs to be set on me? Well, it's a long road as has no turning, and my turning has come at last! And, my fine gentleman'll never know how the little chap disappeared."

"May I?" persisted Walter, breathlessly. "They are all such big boys, and I'm only a little fellow!"

"Where was you a-wantin' to go?" slowly questioned the old man, feeling of his stubbly gray beard.

"We came from Monmouthshire," said the boy. "Near the Usk River. My aunt Joanna is there somewhere."

"Monmouthshire," repeated the old man, whose ideas, from long habit and the wandering nature of his life, were scarcely less vague than the child's own. "Bless your little heart, I know the place, and I'd as soon go on the tramp there as any place."

Walter scrambled to his feet. "Come, then," said he. "Come, quick! The big boys will be looking for me to beat me. Oh! why don't you hurry?"

"I knows of a many dodges as they'll never be up to, young sir," said the old man, slowly rising, and folding the remains of his meal into the handkerchief, which he bestowed in some nook or corner of his ragged garment. "Don't ye be a frettin' of yourself. Come!"

And crossing the road they took a narrow path which skirted a field of turnips, and lost itself in a dense copse of young birches and hazel bushes. Walter skipped ahead, laughing and talking; the old tinker followed after a more leisurely fashion, smoking a black pipe, and meditating. At first the child was in a panic lest Israel Newitt or Professor Proale, with his greasy face and twinkling black eyes, should start out from every leafy thicket, or appear, ghost-like, at the termination of every path. But as the distance gradually widened between himself and Hapbury Home his fears correspondingly quieted.

"Do you think they have missed me yet?" he asked, coming close to his new friend.

The old man nodded. Walter softly took hold of his battered coat-skirt, as if for protection.

"Will—will they find me, do you think?" he faltered.

"Not they, young sir," said the old man, with a placid smile. "Don't you be afeard. I'll answer for that!"

And at noon they sat down together on the edge of a limpid stream, to eat what remained of their little store, and rest their weary limbs.

"Look here, young master," said the tinker, "it's just possible as I may have got myself into a scrape."

"How?" said Walter, who, with his worn shoes removed, was laving his tired little feet in the sun-warmed water, and carelessly flinging stones into the tide.

"Suppose as we don't find your friends?"

"Ay, but we shall," said Walter. "Aunt Joanna was at

a little farm-house not far from Monmouth. I should know the place again if I were to see it."

"Yes; but suppose as she was gone."

Walter lifted his frank blue eyes to the old man's face.

"I could stay with you, then," said he.

"The Lord ha' mercy on us!" ejaculated the tinker.

"And learn the tramp's trade," added Walter, cheerfully.

"I was to have been learned a trade if I stayed at Hapbury Home."

"Humph!" grunted the old man; "it's a mighty unsatisfactor trade, though—for them as can do better. But come on, little master. It's possible as you may think different about the tramping trade arter you've tried it a little."

But to the elastic spirits and ever-renewed strength of the boy it seemed like paradise, this gypsy sort of life in the open air, listening to improbable stories, sleeping under haystacks, and eating when and where they could.

"Oh, I am quite sure I should like to be a tramp!" said the little heir of Branchley, enthusiastically.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MRS. PIDGE'S LODGER.

WHEN Miss Joanna Beck had left Branchley Manor House, it had not been altogether with a friendly and satisfied feeling toward the gentleman with whom she had had so lengthy an interview. For an instant she stood in the leafy shadows of the shrubberies, glaring vindictively at the old house with its warm, age-mellowed tints, and its sides draped with glistening green ivy. A statue of Diana at her left seemed to lean forward on the tip of one slender marble foot, with uplifted bow and hunter's horn—to her, in default of other audience, Miss Beck scornfully addressed herself.

"Does he take me for a fool?" said Miss Joanna. "Fifty pounds and my passage paid? Humph!"

No combination of letters or words could serve to convey the intense contempt of the last monosyllable, as Miss Joanna snorted it out.

"I'll bide my time," said Miss Joanna, "and see which way the wind blows. I'll keep my eye on the child, and on Mr. Julian Branchley, too. I haven't brought my pigs all the way from the State of Vermont to dispose of 'em in such a market as this. I'll wait, and I'll be patient!"

She trudged back, slowly and with a feeling of despondency,

to the little cottage, just out of the village of Branchley-upon-Usk, where she had engaged lodgings at a most economical rate. Mrs. Pidge, the landlady, who was a dairy-woman upon a small scale, had just finished her churning, and was washing the implements in the little stream that tinkled along at the foot of her garden. On a bench at the south end of the cottage glistened a row of silver-bright milk pans, a colony of bees hummed in a straw-thatched nook at the left, and a row of golden-hearted daffodils was just coming into bloom in the little border in the front yard, and all conveyed the idea of rustic peace and felicity. Ah! how little one can judge by outward appearances! Apparently Mrs. Pidge was an Eve in a modern Garden of Eden; but in reality Pidge drank, and his unlucky helpmate had all that she could possibly do to keep the wolf Poverty from her door; and an occasional lodger was to Mrs. Pidge an oasis in the desert of her financial difficulties.

"The rooms is neat, and the terms is low, with the best of attendance, and meals cooked to order, if desired," said Mrs. Pidge, plaintively; "and I does my best to give satisfaction."

She was a mild-faced little woman, with watery, blue eyes, that looked as if they never left off weeping, colorless flaxen hair, thinly streaked with threads of silver, and a limp cap border, that hung dejectedly over her face.

"Happy to see you safe back again, ma'am, I'm sure," said Mrs. Pidge, courtesying her way into the front garden, and obsequiously opening the gate, "and I hope you found your friends well, ma'am?"

"I didn't find any friends," remarked Miss Joanna, seating herself in the little porch where the honeysuckles were just putting out their clusters of pale-pink buds.

"No, ma'am?" Mrs. Pidge put her head inquiringly on one side. "I'm sure as I thought and understood you to say—"

"Friends ain't so easy found in this world," said the American spinster, shortly.

"No, ma'am, to be sure not," said Mrs. Pidge. "As I'm sure me and Pidge has the best of reason to say. Will he be along pretty soon, ma'am?" blinking her arch eyes in the direction of the gate.

"Who?" said Joanna.

"The little gentleman, ma'am."

"He won't be along at all," said Miss Joanna. "I've disposed of him."

Mrs. Pidge started nervously. She was a woman who read

the penny journals with an omniverous literary appetite, and dim visions of Wally tied up in a sack at the bottom of the Usk River, or buried under last year's dead leaves, like the "Babes in the Woods," rose up in her mind.

"Though, of course," she thought to herself, "Miss Beck is quite respectable, and seemed to be fond of the child, in a way. Indeed!" she added, aloud.

"Yes," said Joanna. "And now, ma'am, I'll take my tea, if there ain't no objection."

And over the cup that cheers but not inebriates, Joanna made up her mind as to her future campaign.

"I'll stay quietly where I am," she thought, "and watch a little, and ask a question now and then. And I'll find out when Sir Basil is to be at home. He can't stay away forever, that's certain!"

A few judicious questions elicited the fact that Mrs. Pidge knew one of the house-maids at the manor house.

"Yes," said the landlady, who was rather proud of her aristocratic acquaintances, "me and she was in service together at Monmouth, afore I married Pidge. Miss Mary Jane Moulton—a very genteel young person. And, as you say, ma'am, it's lonesome here, and a bit o' company would liven us up wonderful—and if you've no objection, Miss Beck, I'll ask Mary Jane down to tea to-morrow."

"I should like to meet her," said Joanna, bluntly.

"And I'm sure, ma'am, she'd be proud to make your acquaintance," said Mrs. Pidge; and immediately upon this she proceeded to take down and dust her best crockery, and collect together the materials for a currant cake.

Miss Mary Jane Moulton arrived the next day—a pert, overdressed person, nearer forty than thirty, who patronized Mrs. Pidge and smelled incessantly at a gilt-stoppered bottle. Joanna Beck greeted her with the most gracious politeness of which she was capable.

"Happy to see you, Miss Moulton, I am sure," said she, giving the genteel house-maid's hand a decided American shake.

"The pleasure is all on my side, ma'am," whimpered Mary Jane.

"I suppose you've a fine place up at the manor house," remarked Miss Joanna.

"Well, yes—as places go," said Mary Jane Moulton.

"I've no partick'lar fault to find."

"They're grand gentry, I'm told," said Joanna, insinuatingly.

“Ah, you may believe that,” sighed the maid. “Six men-servants and each of us women sitting down to tea every evening in the servants’ hall!”

“Humph!” commented Miss Joanna. “We don’t have any such goings-on in my country. We’re all free and equal there!”

Mary Jane Moulton sighed her mild pity at this deplorable state of things.

“A large family?” questioned Joanna.

“Well, not so very,” answered the Abigail, considering before she answered. “There’s my lady, and Mr. Julian, and his lady, and little Master Basil, as was three years old yesterday, and Miss Helen, and Lady Rosamond Trente. And there’s Mrs. Bracy, the governess, as is neither lady nor servant—not but what my lady is most uncommon fond of her, and treats her for all the world like a daughter.”

“And the little boy?” suggested Miss Joanna, looking furtively up.

“Master Basil, do you mean?”

“No—not him. The one Mr. Julian Branchley has adopted.”

Mary Jane Moulton stared. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, ma’am,” said she. “There’s no little boy been adopted, nor thought of, as I’ve heard on.”

“But there is one visiting there.”

Mary Jane shook her head.

“No, Miss Beck,” said she, “there ain’t.”

“You’re sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“Humph!” said Joanna. “Then I was misinformed, that’s all.”

But, long after Mary Jane Moulton had taken her languid airs and her gilt-stoppered smelling-bottle back to the manor house, Joanna sat in the little white-curtained window, thinking.

“What has he done with the child?” she asked herself. “I never set much store by him, but still, he was only a child. And if there has been any foul play I’m not the woman to stand by in silence. No, I’ll wait no longer: I’ve waited, mayhap, too long already.”

A dim fear, too horrible to be placed in words, began to shape itself vaguely in her mind; a dreadful uneasiness took possession of her thoughts. She could neither rest quiet by day nor sleep at night—and on the third day she put on her

shabby straw bonnet and coarse faded shawl and set resolutely forth.

"I'll be at the bottom of this mystery, or I'll know the reason why," said Miss Joanna to herself. "I'll go to the manor house and ask this man, face to face, what he has done with the child."

But before Joanna had reached the great iron gates, with the little red-brick lodge nestling beside them, under its canopy of budding boughs and trailing ivy leaves, she came, most unexpectedly upon the object of her search. The gates swung open, and Julian Branchley, on a thorough-bred gray horse, trotted out, followed at a respectful distance by a groom in plain livery, upon a second horse.

Joanna Beck stood still by the side of the road, tall and gaunt, and erect as a human telegraph pole; the horse shied to one side as he came opposite her; Julian Branchley uttered an exclamation of angry impatience.

"In Heaven's name, woman," cried he, "what are you standing there for, to imperil a man's life and limb?"

"I wanted to speak to ye, Mr. Branchley," said Joanna, approaching, while Julian's attention was riveted upon the rears and plunges of his steed. It was a brief contest, ending, as any one who knew Julian Branchley might have predicted, in the victory of the latter.

"Are you a beggar?" questioned he, sitting erect upon his horse, and fixing the cold light of his strange, near-sighted eyes upon the woman who still stood patiently by the roadside. "If so, you run a very great risk by coming hereabouts. Our laws are stringent, and most rigidly enforced. If you have any business you will find my steward at the house between the hours of ten and two."

Joanna looked at him in great surprise. "I have business, Mr. Branchley," said she, "but it is with you. I want to know what you have done with the boy?"

"The boy!" repeated Mr. Branchley. "What boy?"

"With the boy I brought to your house and left in your care three nights ago," said Joanna.

"My good woman, you must be dreaming, or mad!" exclaimed Julian Branchley. "Stand aside, and let me pass. My time is too valuable to be wasted in such fool's play as this!"

"What!" cried out Joanna, scarcely believing her own senses; "is it possible—no, it can't be!—that you have *forgotten* me?"

Julian Branchley looked her full in the face.

"I never saw you before in all my life," said he.

"You never gave me fifty pounds in money! You never promised to pay my passage back to America? You never let me out secretly through the shrubbery path, lest any of the servants should see me?" gasped Joanna, with a dull-red glow flashing into her sun-browned face.

Julian broke into a short, contemptuous laugh.

"This really transcends everything," said he. "Simmes," to the servant, "why are you lingering behind thus? Do you not know that I am already behind my appointment? As for you, woman," to Joanna, "if I find you hanging about the place after to-day, I shall not hesitate to commit you before the county magistracy."

And shaking his horse's rein lightly, he rode swiftly away, followed by his groom, who stared curiously at the tall, gaunt woman, as he clattered by at full speed.

Joanna Beck drew a long breath, when the cloud of dust along the road-side alone remained of the two horsemen.

"So," she muttered to herself, "he defied me! He has used me as a tool, and he would fain fling me aside; but he shall find that I am not quite so easily disposed of. Commit me, will he! Treat me like a washerwoman! Not if I know it!"

And Joanna Beck's haggard face was not pleasant to look upon, as she slowly walked along the road in the direction of Mrs. Pidge's cottage, with teeth firmly clinched and eyes gleaming with resentful fire. The birds sung their vesper songs in the thicket as she passed, the sunset glowed with radiant pillars of violet and gold; but the solitary pedestrian saw only the derisive scorn in Julian Branchley's face, heard but the mocking sound of his laugh.

"He made a mistake in defying me," she muttered to herself. "Yes—he made a mistake."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"WHERE IS MY BOY?"

"It's that wretched Pidge again," said Lady Branchley, piteously. "I never saw any one so consistently unlucky before! It's the third time within a month that he has been taken up for disorderly drunkenness, and it has taken all his poor wife's earnings to bail him out and pay the fines. And she is behind with the rent, and has been up here this morning, while we were driving out, to beg me to come and see her."

"Of course," said Lady Augusta, indifferently, "it can only mean that she wants money. And, really, mamma, I do not see that she can expect you to do anything more for her than you have already done."

"Yes, I know," said gentle Lady Branchley. "But if the man is really so ill—"

"He has brought it on himself," said Lady Augusta, frigidly. "One can hardly waste one's pity on a wretched, demoralized brute like that."

Lady Branchley sighed and hesitated. Lady Augusta's theory might be—doubtless was—the correct one; but her gentle nature had always been attuned to mercy and compassion, and poor Mrs. Pidge's sorrow and desolation appealed to her sympathetic heart.

Theodora Bracy was sitting at work in the window, with Helen playing at her side. She looked up just as this moment.

"Shall I go there for you, Lady Branchley?" said she. "I should like the walk. And I can easily ascertain if there is really any occasion for your charity."

"My dear, I should be grateful if you would," cried Lady Branchley, with evident relief. "I really think that some one ought to investigate the matter, and after our long drive of this morning, I feel hardly able to go out myself a second time."

"For my part," said Lady Augusta, coldly, "I see no occasion for any one to go!"

"May I go, too, Dodo?" pleaded Helen, eagerly.

"I am afraid it is too long a walk for you, Helen," said Dora, looking fondly down upon the rosy, upturned face.

"Oh, *please*," cried Helen, "grandmamma, say I am to go."

"It is just as Dora decides," said Lady Branchley, smiling, and Dora rang the bell.

"Send Mary Jane with Miss Helen's hat and parasol," said she. "We are going for a walk."

And the distance between the manor house and Branchley-upon-Usk seemed all too short in the still, calm sweetness of the summer afternoon, as Dora walked along, with Helen now trotting at her side, with an infinity of childish questions—oh, how sweet a task it was to the mother's lips to answer them—now skipping ahead for chance flowers, stray mosses, or an occasional shining pebble. She liked to be alone with Helen; she could talk to her then, shower tender kisses on her baby brow, and load her with caresses, as she never dared to do be-

neath the cold, critical gaze of Lady Augusta, or even Lady Branchley's mild, questioning glance.

Mrs. Pidge welcomed them with a succession of courtesies, sniffs, and apologies.

"Yes, my lady," she groaned, "leastways, miss, I mean, I *have* had a deal of trouble. It do seem, my lady—I beg pardon, miss—as if there weren't nothing but trouble in this life. And Pidge, he's enough to try the temper of a saint, if saint I was, which I never pretended to be, my lady—miss, I would say."

And then followed a recital in detail of Mrs. Pidge's tribulations and Mr. Pidge's various peccadilloes and shortcomings, during which Helen amused herself by gamboling across the floor with a pet kitten, and Dora listened with all the patience which she could command.

"Very well, Mrs. Pidge," she said, rising at length, "I will send down one of the servants in the morning with money for the quarter's rent. But mind you make your husband understand that this is the last time that Lady Branchley will interfere in his behalf."

"I'll tell him, miss, sartin," courtesied Mrs. Pidge. "And I thank her ladyship kindly, and you, too, miss. If Pidge has got the soul of a mouse in that poor rum-sodden body of his, he won't ax it again. Will the little lady accept a bunch of daffodils, miss, as can't be no brighter than her own pretty hair, bless her heart? I'd be proud to pick 'em for her, if she wouldn't scorn 'em."

Little Helen graciously accepts the humble floral offering, although no persuasion could induce her to let Mrs. Pidge kiss her.

"She is very chary of her caresses," said Mrs. Bracy, smiling. "Come, Nelly, we have a long walk before us, and the sun is nearly down. Good-afternoon, Mrs. Pidge. Either Johnson or Mr. Angevine will come down in the morning!"

And, amid a profusion of tears and thanks, she took her leave.

"Ain't she a beauty, though," said Mrs. Pidge to herself, as she peered over the green paper blinds at her guest's departing footstep, "with all that lovely yellow hair coiled around and around her head, until you'd think there was no end to it, and them big dark eyes, with the long lashes, and the black silk dress that fits her as if she'd grown in it, and the string of black beads about that round white neck of hers! To my mind, there ain't one of the grand ladies at the manor house as comes anywhere within reach of her; and she only

miss's governess, as Mary Jane tells me! Well, well, there ain't no accountin' for the Lord's dispensations!"

Helen Branchley had darted down one of the side paths of the cottage garden in search of the kitten, which had challenged her to a second race on the very door-step, and Dora stood waiting for her, when there was a creaking sound of the hinges of the gate; it opened slowly, and a tall, gaunt woman, dressed in faded calico, with a close black bonnet, a discolored shawl, and a parasol with a broken top, came striding up the path. She paused suddenly as she came face to face with the fair apparition in the glistening black silk dress, and the curls of golden hair.

"My God!" she cried out, starting back a pace or two, "it is Theodora!"

And Dora herself, turning as white as death, cried out:

"Joanna!"

For a second they stood rooted to the ground, looking at one another, as if half believing that the whole incident was a dream; and then, springing forward, with quivering lip, eyes alight, and cheeks burning now with the intensest crimson, Dora seized her sister's arm, crying out:

"Joanna, where is he? My boy—my little Walter! Oh, tell me what you have done with him? Do not keep me longer in this frightful suspense! Where is he, I say? Where is he?"

Joanna Beck's face had turned to a dull, sickly pallor; she quailed before the lightning of Dora's eyes, the wild pleading of her voice.

"How should I know?" she retorted. "Let go of my arm, Theodora; I have done nothing with your boy."

Dora sunk down on a low, circular bench of unpainted wood which surrounded an apple-tree close beside them, bursting out into hysteric sobs and cries. Little Helen, who had run up at the sound of strange voices, flung her arms around the slender, bowed neck, and stamped her tiny foot angrily at Joanna.

"Go away!" she vociferated. "How dare you scold my Dodo? I will make my uncle Julian put you in prison."

Mrs. Pidge hurried out, much wondering what had happened, and the general confusion was heightened by a deep guttural voice, crying out:

"Tinware to mend—tinware to me-e-e-nd! Please, ladies and gentlemen, if you have any old kettles or frying-pans, let me try my hand at 'em, and I'll engage to give satisfaction. Candlesticks or gridirons—wash-boilers or saucepans—I don't

care what it is, or how it's damaged, only give me a chance. Tinware to mend—tinware to me-e-e-nd!"

It was a brown-faced old man with a traveling-pack upon his shoulder, and his keen dark eyes nearly hidden by the tattered brim of a most outlandish old straw hat, which was sewed on to the crown of another of quite different color and texture. And by the hand he led a little flaxen-haired child.

Miss Joanna Beck turned around, and stood a second with blank, astounded eyes; and then, as if suddenly waking from a dream, she sprung forward, clutching little Walter by the arm.

"Why, here he is now!" screamed she.

* * * * *

"This is the house, David—I 'most know this is the house!" little Walter had cried, shrilly, as they advanced within sight of the blossoming apple-trees and honeysuckle hedges which made the Pidge cottage a thing of beauty in the spring-time of the year.

"Are you sartin, my lad?" said the old tramp, looking earnestly up at the low, thatched roof and deep-set casements.

"Oh, yes, David, yes! Oh, I remember those bee-hives—and the old well at the back, with the funny little house built over it—this is the house!" cried out little Walter. "And there is my aunt Joanna now, with her black bonnet, and the ugly shawl with the stripes in it. Oh, David, let us run!"

But when Walter had heard the sound of strange voices in the garden, and seen the little group gathered under the apple-tree, he shrunk back, with a sudden accession of childish bashfulness.

"David," said he, with deepening color and a quivering lower lip, "I am afraid."

"Afraid, my bonnie laddie!" said the old man. "And of what? Nay, take my hand, and we'll go and see what all this noise and confusion may mean."

And, with the noisy, chanting cry of his trade, old David the tramp pushed the garden gate open, and walked deliberately, and not without a certain majesty, into the midst of the little group.

At Joanna's exclamation, Dora lifted her head, and looked straight at the blue eyes and sweet, childish face of her own long-lost boy! In a second—in the twinkling of an eye, as it were—she recognized him. The years that had elapsed had not changed the frank, bright eye, nor darkened the sunny-brown hair. It was the same little Walter that had been rocked to sleep so many a time on her breast; the same dear

one that she had carried in her arms, and wept over, and dreamed over, through the dreary hours of the terrible past. Heedless of Helen's claspings arms, she fell on her knees, with streaming eyes and outstretched hands.

"Walter!" cried she. "Wally! my boy—my treasure! Don't you know me?"

Walter looked at her a minute, with curiously contracted baby brows and trembling lips.

"I think," said he, slowly; "I think—that you must be my mamma."

CHAPTER XL.

RETROSPECTIVE.

LITTLE Helen strove to push Walter away with all the strength of her tiny arms.

"Go away, little boy!" she cried out, with frowning brows, and yellow curls tangled over her forehead, "you are making Dodo cry again."

The young mother laughed hysterically through her streaming tears.

"Helen," said she, "can you not guess who this little boy is? Look into his eyes, darling; put your arms around his neck. He is your brother. Your own twin brother, Helen!"

"I have got no brother," said Helen, with serious eyes lifted to Dora's face. "I have only a cousin, and his name is Basil Julian Branchley."

"You *have* a brother, Helen," said Dora, gently putting the child's arms about Walter's neck. "Kiss him, dearest. Love him as dearly as you can, to pay for all the years of love that he has lost!"

The two children looked solemnly into each other's eyes.

"I know where there is a white kitten," said Helen.

"Where?" said Walter.

"Come and see," said Helen.

And, hand in hand, the little ones disappeared behind the pink cloud of drooping apple blossoms, while Dora, with her face still marble-pale, and her lip quivering, turned to Joanna.

"And now," said she, "tell me all. Where has he been these years? How dared you to take him away from me? Speak—quickly—for if ever human being rendered up an account to another, you shall render up yours to me now!"

"It was no fault of mine," said Joanna, sullenly. "You promised to write, and you did not. You promised to send money, and the money never came!"

"I took a fever in the steerage," said Dora, wildly. "For weeks and weeks I lay ill at Southampton, in a hospital. How could I write then? And, just as soon as I was able to dictate, I sent you a letter telling all, and begging you to have a little patience! Oh, cruel, cruel Joanna, to disregard an appeal like that!"

"I never received the letter," said Joanna, doggedly.

"True—true!" cried Dora, recollecting the letter she had reclaimed from the post-office that dreadful night when first she realized that she was childless. "But it needed not letters between you and me, Joanna; you should have *known* that I could never abandon my little ones, happen what would."

"I don't see why I should have known anything of the sort," retorted the elder woman, sullenly. "I never did put any faith in you nor your English husband. You were gone, and there were the children on my hands. That was all that I knew. And I was bound to look to myself."

"And so you turned the poor little helpless innocents adrift on the world, to shift for themselves as best they might!" cried Dora, springing up and pacing back and forth in the narrow garden path. "Joanna Beck, if you live to be a hundred years old, God's curse will rest upon you for this!"

"You haven't outgrown your old habit of tragedy heroics," sneered Joanna. "It's all very well to talk, but I did what seemed to me for the best."

"I think you have no heart!" said Dora, bitterly. "But all these recriminations are useless now. The past is past, and nothing can undo it. Tell me all about it. Remember that my child's life for the last four years has been a blank to me, and in mercy tell me what you know!"

Joanna Beck recounted all the incidents of Walter's baby-life, during the years that had separated him from his mother's side, Dora listening the while with feverish eagerness.

"So when I heard as the detectives was inquiring around, and as Sir Basil Branchley himself had been to Saratoga," said Joanna, when the thread of her story had been brought up nearly to the present, "I made up my mind to make what money was to be made off the business myself."

"Your natural bent of character," said Dora, contemptuously. "Go on."

"I knew that these Cheswick people wanted to get rid of Walter," pursued Joanna, "so I went to 'em, and offered to take him for good and all off their hands. They consented,

gladly enough, as you may guess—and I scraped together what money I could and brought the child to England.”

“Well?”

“I inquired my way to Branchley. It wasn’t an easy business; but I’ve knocked around the world considerably, and I’m not a woman to be discouraged by little things. I did it quietly, because I didn’t know how I was to be received. And when I got into the very presence of the tall, dark man, with the eyeglasses and the stoop in his shoulders—”

“Mr. Julian Branchley—go on.”

“I discovered as Sir Basil was away from home. Well, I told this Mr. Julian my story, I showed him the little lad. He pretended he didn’t believe me, but he did. I could see it in every line of his face—hear it in his voice. He made as if he thought the whole thing an imposture, but he said the child was a likely child enough, and he’d take him and provide for him.”

“And you consented?”

“Of course I consented,” said Joanna, “what else could I do? I had tramped around England with the child until the very soles were worn off my shoes, and I hadn’t money left to buy a loaf of bread or a draught of milk. I must do something with the lad, and I knew as he’d be well enough off among his father’s kin. He gave me fifty pounds, the dark man did, and promised to pay my passage back to America. The fifty pounds I made sure of, but the passage is all moonshine. I inquired around, in a quiet way afterward, and found the child had been disposed of. I met my lord out riding on a fine prancing horse, with a liveried groom, and asked him about the child. If you’ll believe me, Dolly, he stared at me and asked me what child. In my very face and eyes, he made as if I was a total stranger, and he had never seen me in all his born days. I knew in a second that he was going to play a double game. It came over me, like a flash of lightning, like as he meant mischief. This was yesterday. What he had done with Walter I don’t know. He was not at the great house, that was certain.”

“Walter!” Dora hurried toward the garden path, where the children’s golden heads were glancing to and fro like sunbeams. “Walter! come here a minute.”

Walter came, with Helen clinging to his hand.

“Tell me,” said Dora, breathlessly, as she drew him close to her, and looked eagerly into his eyes, “where have you been since Joanna left you at the manor house? What did your uncle do with you?”

"He gave me something to eat," said Walter, contracting his brows in the effort to remember. "And some wine."

"Well?"

"And then I went to sleep. And when I waked up again, we were getting out of the cars—and it was all pitch dark, except where the signal-lights were shining, and we got a carriage and rode to the Hapbury Home."

"Where was the Hapbury Home?" questioned Dora. "And what was it?"

"It was a great ugly house," said Walter, "without any trees around it, and no carpet on the floor. And I was to learn a trade—and the boys wanted me to black their boots, and they were going to beat me with a strap."

Dora shuddered, and drew the little fellow closer to her side.

"I was to stay there until I was a man," said Walter.

"The gentleman said so."

"What gentleman, Walter?"

"The gentleman that took me there," said Walter, "with the spectacles. But when I peeped through the crack in the shed, where the boot-blackening stuff was, and saw David eating his breakfast, I called out to him—and David pulled a board off the shed, and I crept through. So we ran away together, David and I. And we walked, and walked, and walked, until we came here. I knew it was somewhere in Monmouth, for I heard a man tell Aunt Joanna so—and I knew I could tell the house when I came to it; and I did."

"It's all true, my lady," added David Tait, the itinerant tinker, who had risen from his seat by the garden gate, and drawn nearer during the child's artless recital. "I found him at the Hapbury Home—and a bad place that is, my lady. Not but the little lads has enough to eat and drink, such as it is—but old Proal, he thinks of nothing but the money, and they's mortal cruel with each other, them lads, and they drops away with pestilence and fever, like leaves in a high wind. If I had a little lad of my own, my lady," old David added slowly, shaking his head, "that there Hapbury Home is the last place I should like to see him in."

Dora had listened with pale cheeks, and eyes shining with troubled light.

"His own nephew!" said she, incoherently. "The heir of Branchley! His brother's child! Oh, heavens! of what base material is Julian Branchley made! Come, Walter."

"Where are we going, mamma?" said the child, piteously. "Can I not stay here and rest, and play with Helen?"

"I forget," said Dora, laughing hysterically, "I am always

forgetting. Mrs. Pidge," to the landlady, who had been all eyes and ears, behind the white cotton curtains of the window, "give the little boy something to eat and drink. And the old man, too. And send into Branchley for a fly; I must drive back to the manor house at once. Joanna, you must accompany me."

"I'd do a'most anything to put a spoke in Julian Branchley's wheel," said Miss Joanna Beck, with a quiet vindictiveness that boded ill for the gentleman in question. "He's done his best to play me false, and I ain't one to forget old scores."

And while little Walter and his strange comrade of travel were eating the food provided by Mrs. Pidge—it was only home-baked bread and cheese, with a pitcher of new milk, but it was better than any nectar or ambrosia to the famished wayfarers—Dora took little Helen up into her lap.

"Helen," said she, "listen. You have always called me Dodo until now; you must learn to call me something else now. You must call me 'mamma.'"

"My mamma is dead," said the child.

"Darling, your mamma is not dead," whispered Dora, laying her cheek against Helen's curls. "She is here, holding you to her heart. She has been with you for years, watching over you, loving you, cherishing you. I am your mamma, Helen. Walter is your little brother. Call me by my new name, sweet—let me hear the blessed word. Say 'mamma,' Helen!"

"Mamma," said the child, reaching up to kiss her mother's pale, agitated face. And then she ran away to look at a motherly old hen, with a brood of yellow, downy chickens, who just then came clucking around the corner of the house. To Dora the whole thing was a crisis in her life: but Helen accepted it as a matter of course. There is no such thing as the incredible to a child; it is only to grown people that doubts and misgivings come, like gloomy shadows, darkening all their lives.

"If you please, miss—ma'am, I ought to say," said Mrs. Pidge, courtesying herself into view, "the fly is a-waitin', with Jonas Deemes to drive—a most respectable young man, my lady, as is most careful with horses, and understands his business complete."

And Joanna followed her sister into the carriage, where the children had already been placed, while old David, whom nothing could induce to enter a vehicle of any nature whatsoever, trudged on behind, keeping well in sight of the fly; for

Mr. Jonas Deemes's horses were not of the liveliest, and old David was a pedestrian of no mean ability.

CHAPTER XLI.

“FORGET ME!”

“I DON'T see what can possibly detain Dora so long,” said Lady Augusta Branchley, sweeping across the drawing-room with an air of impatience. “Do you know, mamma, I don't think that it is at all a good plan for her to be wandering in and out of that wretched labyrinth of poor people's cottages with Helen.”

“My dear,” said gentle Lady Branchley, “what can possibly be the harm?”

“Harm!” re-echoed Lady Augusta, petulantly twisting the jeweled bracelet around and around her white arm. “It may be all very well for Mrs. Bracy, the governess, to expose herself to typhus and malaria, and all sorts of horrible diseases, but the health of Sir Basil Branchley's only child is quite another thing.”

“You are disturbing yourself unnecessarily, Augusta,” returned Lady Branchley, mildly. “I really do not think that there is any danger. Mrs. Pidge's cottage is extremely clean and neat, and I have always observed that Dora is possessed of unusual discretion and good sense.”

“There it is again,” said Lady Augusta, with a sarcastic elevation of her black eyebrows. “There will be no living in the house with this governess of Helen's, if you are going to make such a favorite of her. She is already beginning to assume all the airs of a member of the family!”

“You are quite mistaken,” said Lady Branchley, roused at last into energy; “Dora is what she always was, the gentlest and least assuming of persons.”

Julian Branchley was sitting near the window, playing chess with Lady Rosamond Trente. He looked impatiently up.

“Typhus - malaria!” repeated he. “What nonsense! Augusta is always fancying all manner of horrors.”

“You wouldn't like it for Basil, would you?” retorted Lady Augusta.

“I am not going to shut Basil up in a glass case, whatever other follies I may be guilty of,” said Julian, sharply.

He had changed singularly since the night when he sat so diligent at his studies while Lady Augusta was absent at the charade party. His face, always sallow, had taken on a still

paler and more colorless shade; his eyes were restless and furtive in their glance, turning instinctively toward the door at the slightest noise, as if he were in constant dread of some unwelcome apparition presenting itself on the threshold. His appetite was gone, and a constant fever seemed to smolder in his veins; his temper had grown irritable and uncertain. Lady Branchley had even whispered to her daughter-in-law her opinion that Julian was not well.

"I really think he had better consult a physician, my dear," said Lady Branchley.

"Oh, it's nothing," said Lady Augusta, carelessly. "Only one of his moods. It will soon pass away."

Lady Rosamond's finger was just laid on the imperial crown of her carved ivory king, to remove him from threatened danger, when her sister uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Oh, look, Julian!" cried she; "they are coming back in a fly. Oh, I hope nothing has happened!"

"What should have happened?" said Julian. "The walk has been too long for Helen, that is all; and Mrs. Bracy has very sensibly called a fly to come back."

"There are *two* children in the fly," said Lady Augusta, who had risen and advanced closer to the casement. "They have whirled around the corner of the house; they will be here presently."

"And I hope we shall have a little peace now," said Julian, impatiently. "It is quite impossible to play chess, or follow any other intellectual occupation with all this buzz and clamor in one's ears."

Lady Augusta shrugged her shoulders and turned away; the game of chess went on placidly once more, and there was a moment's hush.

A moment's only; for before Lady Rosamond had decided in which direction to move her king, the drawing-room door opened, and Julian Branchley started back with a low, half-suppressed cry.

It had come at last—the hovering, unseen danger, the apparition he had so vaguely dreaded.

Theodora Bracy came, white and calm, into the room, leading a little yellow-tressed child in either hand, while Miss Joanna followed, with the erect presence and grim composure of a female grenadier, and old David, the tramp, lingered respectfully in the background. She led the tiny pair direct to Lady Branchley, who had risen from her chair and advanced a pace or two to meet them.

"Dora," said she, in amazement, "why are you so pale? Who is this strange child? Has anything happened?"

"Much has happened," said Dora, in a low, distinct voice. "Lady Branchley, there are your son Basil's children—and mine! I am Basil's American wife! This boy," placing Walter's hand in that of the old lady, "is *his* son, the heir of Branchley. To your care I commit him!"

"Dora!" gasped the old lady, in amazement.

"Yes, I know it seems like a wild, incredible tale," she burst out, "but it is God's own truth! I have witnesses here; I can prove it, even if other witnesses than the boy's own face were needed. Look at him, Lady Branchley! Read his eyes and forehead, and learn therein, written with God's hand, the story of his parentage!"

"It *is* Basil's child!" cried Lady Branchley, beginning to tremble all over like a leaf. "Julian! Julian, look here!"

But Julian had risen and stood livid and pale in the center of the room.

"It is a lie!" said he, hoarsely. "A made-up scheme to deprive my boy of his inheritance."

"I know that gentleman," said Walter, looking boldly up in his face. "It is he that took me to the Hapbury Home."

"Basil's child," solemnly repeated Dora; "the heir of Branchley!"

And she told the story, word for word, to Lady Branchley, of how the little boy had been lost and found—of what had become of him during all that dreary interval during which he had been hidden from her sight—of the curious complication of circumstances by which he had come back, as it were, to her very arms.

"As for me," she added, with a long sigh, "my task is completed at last, now that I have restored Sir Basil Branchley's son to his heritage. I came here a broken-hearted woman, to toil out the remainder of my life—to be where I could sometimes see or hear something of my child—the one daughter who had already forgotten that she had ever had a mother. But Heaven has been very good to me, and the time has come for me to speak!"

Lady Augusta Branchley, who had listened with changing color, now came impetuously forward, with glittering eyes and imposing presence.

"Do you think we are going to believe all this sensational tale?" she demanded, lifting up her white hand as if she would strike the smaller, slighter woman down.

"I do not ask you to believe it on my own unsupported

testimony," said she. "You have heard Joanna Beck's recital, and the story of David Tait."

"Your sister—and your hireling. Disinterested witnesses, truly," sneered Lady Augusta.

"And," calmly went on Dora, "I can show you my marriage certificate, and the baptismal registers of these children. Is there any other evidence needed?"

"It is false—false as hell itself!" thundered Julian Branchley, advancing at last. "Are the future prospects of my boy to be endangered by such a ridiculous fable as *this*? You are an impostor, woman, and—"

"I am your brother's wife!" said Dora, quietly. "Unworthy—and unbeloved, it is true, but still his wife. And there are his children!"

"If you are really his wife—that miserable, low-born adventuress of whom we have heard such unfavorable accounts," broke in Lady Augusta, "why have you been spying here, under an assumed identity? Why did not you claim the rank and position to which you pretend that you are entitled?"

"Why should I claim it?" asked Dora, turning upon her with a sudden bitterness. "Could I bring back my husband's forfeited love? Could I take my old place in his affections? To me, strange as you may deem it, the empty name of Branchley is of little worth. And if you will recall all the circumstances, Lady Augusta, you will remember that it was not of my own free will that I came here. When Miss Jocelyn sent me to Lady Osprey, I was entirely unaware of her connection with the family at Branchley Manor House. When Lady Osprey died, it was through no machinations of mine that Lady Rosamond Trente came here to live, and I as her governess and companion. I have walked blindfold through the world, and the finger of Fate has led me on, in spite of myself."

"I wish you had been dead and buried," cried out Lady Augusta, passionately, "before you ever crossed the threshold of this house! Base impostor that you are!"

"Augusta! Augusta!" pleaded Lady Rosamond, who had advanced and taken Theodora's cold hand in hers.

"I am speaking the truth," flashed out Lady Augusta. "She has warmed her serpent coils in the sunshine of our kindness all these years; she knew that Basil's wife had run away, and that Basil's heir was dead—and out of this slender framework of facts she has constructed an edifice of falsehood by which she vainly hopes to make her own fortune. It is a daring scheme, Mrs. Bracy, but it will hardly bear the day."

light. "Mamma," turning angrily to Lady Branchley, "I think she should be delivered over to the police at once. Julian," clutching at her husband's arm, "why do you stand calmly there and listen to such a monstrous delusion as this?"

Little Walter clung close to his grandmother's arm; the beautiful dark lady, with her passionate words and wild gestures, filled him with a vague terror; Helen stood calmly looking up into Lady Augusta's face; to her the whole scene was nothing more than a pleasurable excitement. But Lady Branchley herself interrupted her.

"Augusta," said she, "you forget that you and Julian are here only as the guests of my son Basil. I entertain no sort of doubt that Theodora's story is true in all its particulars, and I only wonder that, in all these years, no gleam of the actual truth has dawned upon my mind."

"Julian, Julian!" pleaded Lady Augusta, seizing her husband's arm and dragging him forward, "why don't you speak? Will you stand by like a whipped hound and see your boy's rights wrested away from him? Julian, why don't you interfere?"

Julian Branchley turned his haggard face upon his wife with a look which she never, to her dying day, forgot.

"Because it is of no use," said he, doggedly. "Because the child is Basil's child; because the woman is his wife; stop shrieking, Augusta—there is no use in trying to fight single-handed against Destiny."

Theodora turned to him with a quick, sudden gesture of condemnation.

"You knew that the child was Basil's son when you stole away with him, in the dead of night, to try and hide him from me!" she cried.

"I knew it," said Julian, sullenly. "You need not shrink away from me, mother," to Lady Branchley, who had been unable to conceal an involuntary movement of horror. "I meant the child no harm! If I had, what could have been easier than to dispose of him altogether?"

"Julian," said Lady Branchley, "you are my son. I forbear, therefore, from any comment upon your strange and unaccountable behavior. But the same roof can no longer shelter you and me."

"Mamma!" screamed Lady Augusta, "would you turn us out-of-doors?"

"Julian has his own income," said Lady Branchley. "As for a home, he and you are welcome to reside at Sedge Court during my life-time; but, I repeat that I do not judge it ex-

pedient that Basil's child shall dwell under the same roof with you. When he himself returns, he can decide to suit himself. Theodora"—to the young mother, who had stood calmly listening to the decree—"I will ring for Dawson to take this child up to the eastern nursery. He will remain there until you select apartments as you deem best. And remember, nothing in this house can be too good for Basil's heir."

But Theodora drew back, pale and cold, with glittering eyes, and small, white teeth, closed firmly over her lower lip.

"No," said she; "I have wrought out my destiny in bringing the child back to his father's house. Here my mission ends."

"Dora, you surely will not leave him now, when he is newly restored to your arms!" pleaded Lady Branchley.

"It is better that I should!" calmly uttered the girl.

"You can not be in earnest," entreated Lady Branchley.

"My dear girl, stop and reflect a little before you decide."

"And have I not reflected?" burst out Dora. "Do you think, all these years, that I have not asked myself this question and answered it, a score of times over? You have spoken of me as if I were dead and buried—you have sneered at my deficiencies, laughed at my lowly birth, wondered at the infatuation which could ever have induced your son to ally his fate with mine. And there has not been a word you have uttered but my own heart has bidden it amen!"

"But, Dora—"

"Stop a moment, please, Lady Branchley," said the girl. "Hear me to the end. I know—none better—what I am, and what Sir Basil Branchley's wife should have been. But, in spite of this, there is no power in all England that would have kept me from claiming my legal place in his heart and home, if he loved me. He did love me once, Lady Branchley, as dearly as if I had been a crowned princess. And, God help me, it was through my own mad folly that I lost that love. Henceforward my life must be one of penance and self-denial. In your care I am content to leave Sir Basil Branchley's children, until they can be placed in his own keeping."

"And you?" cried Lady Branchley, moved by a vague terror which she herself only half comprehended.

"Forget me," said Dora, softly, stooping to kiss the old lady's white withered hand. "Let me pass out of your sweet sunshiny world like a shadow of the outer darkness, and be as if I had never existed!"

The tears streamed down Lady Branchley's cheeks; she drew Dora close to her.

"Dora!" she cried, "stay! Oh, my daughter—my son's wife, the mother of his children, do not leave me thus. I have learned to love you for your own sake—I will love you still more dearly for Basil's. Oh, my *daughter*, stay!"

But even while she spoke, the girl disengaged herself from her tender clasp, and was gone.

CHAPTER XLII.

A CASE OF BRAIN FEVER.

"Do you really think it is going to be a serious affair, Doctor Anneslie?" said Major Trixham, anxiously.

He was sitting in one of the private parlors of the Royal George Hotel at Southampton, drinking deep-colored port wine and peeling walnuts. For people must eat and drink, under any and all circumstances, and it is surprising how philosophically the best of us can bear the troubles of our friends.

It was early in October, and the sea-coal fire that blazed in the grate was by no means unacceptable. The ruby curtains were drawn over the inky blackness of the autumn night without—the candles shone brightly in their polished brass sconces, and the dessert was neatly set out on a cloth of spotless damask, for Major Trixham was one of those stately presenced men at whose advent hotel-keepers bestir themselves, and waiters get out their best.

Major Trixham was peeling walnuts and sipping port wine, with the soles of his slippers turned comfortably toward the fire, and an open box of Flor del Fumas on the table beyond. Dr. Anneslie was walking up and down the room, twirling his watch-chain thoughtfully.

"*Going to be,*" echoed he, turning short around upon his interlocutor; "it is a serious case. Brain fever is no joke, Trixham, under the most favorable circumstances; but when it comes short and sharp, like this—"

"Deuced unlucky," said Major Trixham, with a sympathetic groan. "But I don't think Branchley has been quite up to the mark this long time."

"Has he been troubled or annoyed by anything lately? In his mind, I mean?" abruptly questioned Dr. Anneslie, stopping short in his promenade, and leaning his arm on the mantel, as he looked intently down into the major's sunburned, English face.

"I believe you," nodded Major Trixham, carelessly flinging a shell into the fire. "What wizards you physicians are, to be sure. Yes, he has. His wife ran away from him four or five years ago, and took the heir with her, and everybody supposed they were dead and out of the way, when all of a sudden, three or four weeks ago, just as we were beginning to enjoy ourselves, there came a letter to Branchley that they had come back—the wife and child. Of course it was a confoundedly startling thing. I never saw a fellow so completely thrown off his balance. And he wouldn't wait one second before starting off, although it wasn't the day for the first-class diligence to start, and we had the deuce and all of a time catching the English mail—and we've traveled night and day ever since. It's enough to kill any man."

"You have telegraphed to his family?"

Major Trixham nodded.

"This afternoon," said he, "before I sent for you. Poor fellow! it seems only yesterday that his father was killed in the hunting field, and he succeeded to the baronetcy. It's lucky about the child turning up at the eleventh hour, for although I make it a Christian rule to hate no man, I must confess that I should have been vexed to see that confounded cur of a Julian Branchley step into his brother's shoes."

"Yes—exactly," said Dr. Anneslie, who had apparently been absorbed in his own meditations during the latter portion of this monologue. "You will remain with Branchley, of course."

"Oh, of course," sighed the major. "I was due on the 12th at Compton Court, but I'm not the fellow to leave a friend in a pinch like this. I'll see him through it, one way or the other, poor lad! At least until his friends come."

"I will send you up a skillful and experienced nurse whom I can recommend," said Dr. Anneslie, "to-night. He needs scientific care. And I'll be here again early in the morning."

"Do," said Major Trixham, with a yawn. "You're not going? I wish I could persuade you to try a little of this old port. It's not bad, for a hotel, I assure you."

Dr. Anneslie shook his head. "Old port and hard-working doctors don't agree," said he, with a grim smile. "Good-evening. Mrs. Bracy will probably be here not far from ten o'clock."

"Is she one of the Mrs. Gamp style of nurses?" lazily demanded Trixham. "Like a feather-bed tied in the middle?"

With a red nose and a weakness for flat bottles? Because, if she is—”

Dr. Anneslie laughed outright this time. “You will see,” said he—and was gone.

He jumped into his brougham, spoke a hurried word or two to the man, and was whirled away to a humble red-brick lodging-house in one of the quieter and remoter parts of the town.

Dora Bracy was sitting all alone at her needle-work, by the light of one lamp, while the least possible of fires smoldered in the little grate. She was dressed in a black gown, with a thread of white visible at her throat and wrists, and her golden hair was fastened plainly back under a stiff little “Sister of Charity” cap, but the bloom on her cheeks was like a Provençal rose, and she was more exquisitely, spiritually beautiful than ever she had been before.

At the familiar rat-tat of the doctor’s knock, she looked radiantly up.

“I have felt it all day, doctor,” said she.

“Felt what?” he demanded, shaking the rain-drops from his shaggy overcoat as he stood on the threshold.

“That I should be wanted.”

“You have prophetic moods, then?”

“Sometimes.”

“Your premonitions are correct this time,” said Dr. Anneslie. “You *are* needed very much indeed.”

Dora rose with alacrity and began her simple preparations, packing a few absolute necessities into a bag, and drawing a black scoop-shaped bonnet over her little muslin cap.

“Is it the little child in Haddon’s Lane?” said she, “or old Mrs. Wirtley’s?”

“Neither,” said Dr. Anneslie, succinctly. “It is a sick gentleman at the Royal George.”

Dora paused suddenly in her preparations.

“Ah, doctor,” she faltered, “I—I hardly like to go to a case like that.”

“Why not?” he demanded.

“I have only dealt with women and children,” pleaded Dora. “I dare not take the responsibility.”

“You are by all odds the best nurse on my staff,” said Dr. Anneslie. “As for the responsibility, I take it myself. This is a poor young Englishman who has been taken sick, journeying from the east.”

“Poor!” repeated Dora, softly. “Oh, then, I ought not to hesitate.”

“Not poor as regards this world’s goods,” said Dr. Annes-

lie. "I believe he's a rich man—but he's quite alone, with the exception of an old army friend, who knows no more of the minutiae of sick-nursing than he does of Chaldee. And I fear this disorder may take a grave turn, unless we give the poor fellow every advantage of care and watching. He has friends, but they are in a remote part of England, and can not arrive till to-morrow night at the earliest. And in any event, he needs a conscientious and painstaking nurse."

"I will go," said Dora, quietly.

Dr. Anneslie scribbled a few words upon a card.

"Here is the address," said he. "His valet will give you all the necessary details as to the medicines and things for to-night, and I will see you to-morrow morning. He seems a faithful and attached fellow enough, but he has had no experience in sickness, and does not speak English with sufficient facility to render him of any use."

And Dr. Anneslie had rattled down-stairs, and sprung once more into his brougham, before Dora advanced to the flickering light of the lamp to read the hurriedly scrawled address:

"SIR BASIL BRANCHLEY,

"Room 23, Royal George Hotel, Pembroke Street."

"Sir Basil Branchley!" The card dropped from Dora's paralyzed fingers; she grew deathly pale, while every drop of blood in her veins seemed to stand still for a second, and then leap madly through her pulses with dizzy speed. Her—husband!

Had she not felt it, hanging like a mysterious shadow over her heart all the day? Had his presence not haunted her during the restless watches of the night? Had there not been a strange foreboding consciousness thrilling all her frame that the dial of her life was standing still before some great solemn crisis?

And now it had come.

"I can not—I can not!" she wailed aloud, as she stood wringing her hands, in the solitude of her own room. "I will go to Doctor Anneslie and tell him he must send some one else."

And then, like an overwhelming wave of memory, came back to her the solemn purpose to which she had dedicated the remainder of her poor, wretched life. "To nurse the sick and solitary, as a thank offering for God's mercy in restoring my child to his home and his rights." She had written it down in the fly-leaf of her little Bible. And now was she to quail because in this, the first year of her trial, the juggernaut

car of circumstance jarred against her own weak will? "For better and for worse—in sickness and in health!" Alas! the "better" had ebbed away—the "worse" had settled darkly down upon her life. "Health" was over—and "sickness" had come in good truth.

"In so far as that, I may at least be true to my marriage vows," she thought—and once more arranging the yellow coils of hair beneath that Sister of Charity cap, she covered up the fire, extinguished the lamp, and, pausing only to leave the key of the door with her next-room neighbor, a pale, drudging maker of vests, went quietly out into the dim and rainy dusk of the dismal Southampton streets.

Quite alone she hurried along, past the yawning doors of dismal tenement-houses, the garish glitter of gin-palaces, and gaudy illuminated dens of vice. But wherever she went, the rude seamen and quarrelsome loungers along the streets stepped respectfully aside to let the black-draped figure pass; for the hospital nurse's uniform was known through all Southampton, and respected with a sort of superstitious reverence wherever it was seen.

The clocks were striking nine, when she presented herself before the astounded eyes of Major Trixham, who was still sipping the deep-red port wine and yawning over the evening papers in the little parlor with the cheerful grate fire and close-drawn curtains.

Involuntarily the major started up with a bow.

"I beg your pardon," said he, as if fairly dazzled by the radiant eyes and the hair like spun gold, which the muslin cap only partially covered. "I—I—"

"I am the hospital nurse," said Dora, quietly; "Mrs. Bracy. Will you be good enough to conduct me to the sick gentleman's room? It seems that his servant has received no orders from Doctor Anneslie to admit any one, and has referred me to you."

"Certainly, certainly," said the major, with alacrity. "Victor is a fool—but he's a faithful fool, too. This way, Mrs. Bracy, if you please."

And he remembered with a spasmodic contraction of the risible muscles, the idea he had figured to himself, of a nurse patterned after the "Mrs. Gamp" model, husky of voice, scarlet of nose, and voluminous as to figure.

"Do not allow yourself to be alarmed, madame, if he is a little flighty," said he, courteously. "Doctor Anneslie tells me it is often the case in fevers of this type, and he has known

no one since six o'clock. Stand aside, Victor, this is the nurse. Pray walk in, Mrs. Bracy!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

"I KNEW YOU WOULD COME."

A LARGE airy room, plentifully lighted by wax candles, with a cheerful fire burning in the grate, dark-brown hangings of some gorgeous Japanese material, shot with gold thread, at all the windows, and a tall carved Elizabethan bedstead, festooned and canopied with the same gold-gleaming material, opposite the door; a face, whiter than the white pillows against which it lay, and hands folded like those of a dead man upon the silken counterpane. These were the impressions which printed themselves on Theodora's eyes, as she followed Major Trixham into the sick man's apartment. A soft, subtle odor of eau-de-Cologne pervaded the room, and Victor, the French *valet de chambre*, was moving noiselessly about in slippared feet.

Theodora walked up to the bedside, and stood there for a moment, gazing at the haggard face, with its Saxon curls pushed back and drenched with ice-water—stood there with a face so calm that no casual observer would have conjectured the wild tumult of emotions within her breast. And almost in the same moment, the glittering eyes opened and fell upon her presence.

Something like a sigh of relief fluttered across his lips; he closed his eyes again.

"Dora!" said he, drowsily. "I knew you would come!"

She looked around with wild, startled eyes and hands clasped tightly together. But Major Trixham only smiled.

"That is the way he has been raving all day," said he. "Calling for 'Dora, Dora,' all the time!"

"Has he?" she murmured, mechanically arranging the vials of medicine on the stand beside the bed.

"It was his wife's name, as I gathered from his disconnected talk," added Trixham. "God forgive that woman; she has much to answer for!"

For a second Dora's eyes met his, with an expression of agonized pleading that puzzled the major.

"How can we poor, frail mortals read each other's hearts?" she cried out. "'Judge not, lest ye be judged.' That is one of the mottoes of our sisterhood, Major Trixham."

He looked at her in surprise.

"And now if you will give me the doctor's directions, Victor," said Mrs. Bracy, assuming a tone of gentle authority, "I will make preparations for the night."

It was not until the wax candles had been extinguished in favor of a shaded night-lamp, and Victor was dozing on a lounge in the ante-room, that Sir Basil Branchley seemed to arouse from his uneasy sleep.

"Dora!" he cried out, trying to lift himself from the pillow. "Where is Dora? Has she gone away from me again?"

Noiselessly the nurse glided forward into the light of the lamp, and laid her cool hand on his forehead.

"I am here," said she.

"Don't leave me," pleaded he. "Don't go away. For I love you so dearly, *my* Dora!"

A tremor shook her frame; the slow tears gathered beneath her eyelashes and began to fall, one by one.

"No," said she. "I will not leave you."

"Put your hand in mine," said he, abruptly. "Let me hold yours—and then I shall be sure."

And all through the dreary vigils of the night she sat there, with her hand in his burning clasp, listening with a sinking heart to the wild phantasies of his disordered brain, hearing her own name repeated over and over again, but always in accents of imploring tenderness.

"Did he love me like this?" she asked herself, her face deathly pale in the lurid light. "Oh, God! and I have dared to doubt his constancy? My true and loyal husband—my own love!"

Dr. Anneslie paid his visit early in the morning, long before Major Trixham had turned out of his bed. Mrs. Bracy stood at his side, her large eyes intently fixed upon his face.

"Doctor," said she, "is he better?"

Dr. Anneslie smiled grimly.

"Better," he repeated. "Nay, my child, it is early days to answer that question. Let us be thankful that he is not worse."

"Do you think he will recover?"

"We doctors don't *think*, Mrs. Bracy; we only trust and hope."

Dora turned away with a sickening sensation at her heart. If her husband should have been restored to her, only to be wrested from her once more!

In the course of the morning there was an arrival—a bustle through the halls, and the sound of voices. Major Trixham came in presently.

"Mrs. Bracy," said he, "Sir Basil Branchley's mother is here. She wishes to see her son at once, but I think it best to ask your advice whether it is wise to—"

"I will go to her," said Dora.

Calling Victor to take her place in the sick-room, where Sir Basil was sleeping uneasily, Dora glided out of the room.

Lady Branchley, in a traveling-dress of dark-blue serge, with her veil hanging down her back, and the strings of her hat scarcely unloosed, was standing at the window in Major Trixham's private parlor, her pale, anxious face turned toward the door, her hands nervously clasped.

"Here is the nurse, Lady Branchley," said the major. "She can better inform you as to your son's present state."

"Dora!" Lady Branchley started forward with a cry, partly of astonishment, partly delight.

"Yes, Dora!" said the girl, putting both her hands in those of the elder lady. "Who should nurse Basil, if not Basil's wife?"

"But how did you come here?" eagerly questioned Lady Branchley. "Who told you he was here? And how long have you been in attendance upon him?"

"Doctor Anneslie sent for me," answered Mrs. Bracy. "I have enrolled myself in the Sisterhood of Nurses belonging to the St. Hilarius Hospital. I came here as I would come to the summons of any sick or ailing creature, and I have been rewarded."

"Rewarded?"

She lifted her radiant face to Lady Branchley's.

"He loves me, Lady Branchley," said she, in a tone of voice that was almost inaudible. "He has loved me all along; through all the fever of delirium, the wild ravings of incoherent dreams, I can read that blessed truth!"

She unfastened Lady Branchley's traveling-cloak with gentle hands, removed her bonnet, and laid aside her wrappings on a sofa.

"Come!" said she, "we will share our vigils together—his mother and his wife—and, with God's help, we will bring him back to our love again."

For three long weeks Sir Basil Branchley lay ill at the Royal George Hotel—three weeks during which the light of poor Dora's hopes had well-nigh flickered and gone out more than once. All of one dreadful night she spent upon her knees, wrestling with Heaven in prayer; many a day she watched and waited, scarcely daring to breathe, for the final moment

of dissolution to rend her heart asunder. But God was merciful, and Sir Basil Branchley lived.

It was a bleak December evening, with snow clicking softly against the window-panes, and a sad wind moaning down the chimney, when Sir Basil seemed to wake out of a long troubled sleep to consciousness of all that surrounded him. He looked vaguely around at the candle-light shining on the gold-threaded Japanese draperies over his head, the ruby reflections of the fire on the polished dark wood of the furniture, the deep-red roses that were glowing in a slender-necked vase on the mantel. It was all so strange, so unreal! In an instant, however, his eye fell on a matronly figure in glistening black silk, with ivory-tinted point lace at its throat, and a widow's cap placed lightly on its glossy braids—a figure that converted the whole scene into home at once.

“Mother,” he said, softly.

She dropped the wooden needles with which she was weaving some brilliant combination of white and scarlet wool and hurried to his side, with tears in her eyes.

“Oh, Basil, my son,” cried she, “thank God that you are speaking in your own natural voice again!”

He looked down at his attenuated wrists and claw-like fingers—he tried, but without avail, to lift his heavy head from his pillow.

“I have been very sick?” said he.

“You have, indeed, my son.”

“And where am I now? This—this is not the manor house?”

“You are at the Royal George Hotel, in Southampton. Major Trixham brought you here, and your old friend, Doctor Anneslie, has been attending you.”

“Did they send for you, mother?”

“Major Trixham telegraphed to me, and I came at once.”

He smiled faintly, and pressed her hand with his emaciated fingers.

“That was like you, mother,” said he.

“But, dear Basil, you must not talk much just now,” said the mother, anxiously. “You are so weak—and there is always the danger of a relapse.”

“One more question, mother,” pleaded the baronet. “Are you alone here?”

“Who should be with me, Basil?”

The questioning light died out of his eager eyes; he turned his head wearily to the pillow.

“No one,” said he. “I suppose my brain is full of fever fancies yet.”

And with her eyes still full of tears, Lady Branchley watched him as he drifted off once more into the deep slumber which is better than Eastern drugs to strengthen the worn-out convalescent.

When Dr. Anneslie made his usual visit that evening, she told him what had occurred.

“Let her go to him,” said the doctor, brusquely; “I have known great sorrows to kill people, but great joys—never!”

But Theodora shuddered and shrunk back. Now that the moment for which she had so passionately yearned was close at hand, a haunting cloud of doubts and fears rose up to obscure its brightness.

“Oh, let me go away,” she faltered, “before he looks upon me with cold contempt. He has called my name lovingly—his eyes have rested on me with the old, tender light! I could never endure him to despise me *now*!”

Lady Branchley took her hand gently and led her, pale and trembling, into the sick-room.

The candles were lighted—the fire burned brightly, and Victor had just administered a strengthening draught to his master. Sir Basil looked up with a sudden troubled expression on his face.

“There it is again,” said he, as his mother advanced softly to his side.

“Do you mean—”

“The footstep,” he murmured, passing his hand across his forehead, as if with a troubled effort to remember. “The same footstep that I heard during all that weary delirium! Oh, mother, let me float away into the world of shadows and dreams once more, for *she* was with me in my dreams—my lost love, my Dora!”

These words died away into a low cry. Lady Branchley, with swimming eyes, beckoned to the slight figure, which was concealed behind the curtains, to advance.

“Basil,” whispered she, “Dora is here—in the house—in this very room. Shall she come to you?”

A look of inexpressible love and longing came into Sir Basil’s face; he put out his pale, transparent hand as Dora hurried forward and fell on her knees beside him, her golden hair floating like a glory over the coverlet, her lips pressed against his palms.

“Mine,” he whispered, softly, “mine forever! I knew you would come, Dora.”

CHAPTER XLIV.

“SHE LOVED MUCH.”

“You don’t say so!” said Reuben Hollowell, with his mouth wide open, and his pale-blue eyes dilated to the utmost size compatible with the pattern of their lids.

“Yes, I do,” said Miss Joanna. “It seems exactly like a novel, don’t it? But it’s gospel truth.”

Miss Joanna Beck had been invited to eat her Christmas turkey and mince pie at the Hollowell farm-house. Mrs. Hollowell entertained no objections to Miss Joanna. She was neither young enough nor beautiful enough to entrap her husband’s fickle affections. And besides, Mrs. Hollowell had her natural share of curiosity, and was on the *qui vive* to hear the wonderful story of pretty Dora’s life romance.

“Well, I never!” said Reuben, staring hard at the slice of turkey on his plate. “I always did say as Dora wasn’t cut out for no ordinary fate. She was like a piece of painted porcelain, Dora was.”

“She wasn’t no ways different from nobody else,” tartly interposed Mrs. Hollowell. “Do pass the cranberry sass, Reuben, and leave off making a fool of yourself!”

“She’s ‘My Lady Branchley’ now,” said Joanna. “I’ll take another cup of tea, Mrs. Hollowell, *if* you please. With a coach and four, and servants to do every hand’s turn for her, and I just wish you could see her black velvet dresses, and diamonds, and French hats and things. And Sir Basil, he fairly worships the ground she walks on. And little Walter has his tutor, and Nell has her French maid, and Lady Branchley—the dowager, ye know—”

“What in creation is a dowager?” asked Reuben, staring.

“Sir Basil’s mother, of course,” returned Miss Joanna, with an air of mild patronage.

“We calls ’em mothers-in-law in this part of the country,” said Reuben.

“You don’t understand the peerage,” said Miss Joanna, loftily. “But she’s that fond of Dora she can’t take her eyes off her.”

“She’s different from most mothers-in-law, then,” sniffed Mrs. Hollowell.

“And Mr. Julian and his lady are living at Sedge Court,” added Joanna. “You never see no one so took aback as Mrs. Julian was by little Walter’s turning up, just as she’d made

up her mind as her boy was to be the heir—or p'r'aps I'd ought to call her Lady Augusta."

"I don't see the common sense of that," said Mrs. Hallowell, "nobody calls me Lady Almiry."

"You ain't English," said Joanna.

"Americans is as good as English, every day in the week," said the fair republican.

"I dare say," said Joanna. "But that ain't neither here nor there. She's a grand lady, now, our Dora is."

"Humph!" said Mrs. Hallowell. "Some folks has all the luck."

"There ain't no luck too good for Dora," said stanch Reuben Hallowell.

"But I don't see," persisted Mrs. Reuben, "if Sir Basil set such a dreadful sight o' store by Theodora, how he let her go wanderin' about the world so long without a penny or a friend to keep herself with."

"Didn't he come over to this country lookin' for her?" demanded Joanna. "Didn't he write to her the minute he got to the manor house? And didn't Lady Augusta tear up the letters so as they never reached her? Lady Augusta owned up herself to it, when she was that angry as she never stopped to think of common sense."

"Do tell!" said Reuben. "And there was Dora in her husband's own house, and nobody so much as guessin' who she was! I swan, it's just like a novel!"

"Dora Beck was always sly," remarked Mrs. Hallowell, with quiet venom.

"And what became of the old tin-mending chap as brought little Wally home from the boarding-school place?" questioned Reuben.

"Old David, do you mean? Oh, Sir Basil has given him one of the porters' lodges to keep, and he's snugly provided for until the day of his death," assumed Joanna.

"I should think, while they were about it," remarked Mrs. Hallowell, "they might as well have provided for you, too."

"I don't ask no one to provide for me," retorted Joanna, with an asperity which showed that Mrs. Hallowell's poisoned arrow had sped home. "*I've come back here, and I shall put out the old sign, 'Fine Washing, Fluting, and Italian Ironing Done Here,' and if I can't make a decent living, I'll know the reason why!*"

But Miss Joanna had felt secretly chagrined that the grand gentry at Branchley Manor House had evinced no desire for her companionship or society.

"I ain't good enough for 'em, I suppose," said she, to herself. "I haven't got yellow curls and big eyes and a soft coaxing voice, like Theodora! Well, beauty ain't but skin deep, arter all, and we've all got skulls grinning under our flesh and blood."

And with this scrap of time-worn philosophy, Miss Joanna comforted herself as best she could.

"Well," said Reuben, carving away at the turkey, "one thing's sartin sure—Dora hasn't got no better fortune than she deserved. She was always the flower of all the Saratoga Road."

"It's a pity she didn't appreciate you as highly as you did her," said Almira, biting her thin lip.

"No, it ain't, neither," said Reuben, boldly. "I'm only a great awkward farmer lout, and she's a little delicate creetur intended for a lady and nothing else. And here's to her health and happiness," burying his face in a huge mug of cider, "and may she live to be a grandmother yet!"

For, in his way, honest Reuben was as stanch as any Sir Galahad of them all.

It was quite true. Theodora was peacefully, serenely happy at last. And sitting in the ruby fire-light of that same Christmas evening at Branchley Manor, with Sir Basil at her side and the children playing on the hearth-rug at her feet, she seemed to see her past life as in a mirror. The wild gypsy girl of the Saratoga Road; the tropic-natured creature who had preyed on her own heart at Eaglescliff Hall; the desolate woman who had stood outside the gates at Branchley Manor House, like a Peri shut out from Paradise; the pale, self-contained Sister of Charity, who had devoted herself to God's sick and suffering poor; the happy wife, entering once more into the rich heritage of her husband's love; all these figures seemed to pass before her mental vision like the gliding shadows of a magic panorama.

"What have I done?" she asked herself, "that I should deserve such a happy lot as this?"

What have we any of us done, that we should deserve the rich gifts of Heaven's mercy? It is a question which the wisest philosopher can not answer. Sweet Dora, look into the Holy Word and read its blessed utterance:

"Her sins are forgiven, for she loved much!"



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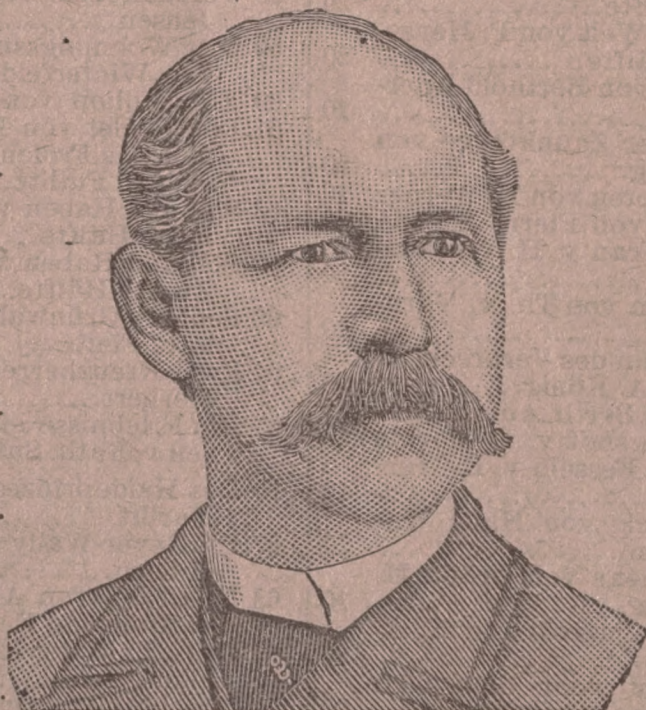
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